

# *Acts* *from the* *Heart*

*a re-telling of the*  
*Acts of the Apostles*



*Holly Lee Vecchio*



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# ACTS FROM THE HEART

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*To the cherished memory of my nephew*  
*Brian Lyle de la Torre*  
*1951-1988*

*Who would not sing for Lycidas?*

— Milton



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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If pretentiousness is lacking in this book, it is because she would not let me get away with using polysyllabic words, like that one. Where there is clarity, it is because she kept the manuscript focused, by her intentionally simple questions. Where I have used humor in this Biblically-founded book, it is because her eyes would twinkle, and she would ask, “Why not?”

And so I gratefully acknowledge her help and give thanks for the person she was — and is.

— Holly Lee Vecchio



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## INTRODUCTION

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“Uh, er, heh, heh. Ahem.”

Many folks tend to stammer and clear their throats a lot when the conversation turns to the Bible. They somehow feel judged, not by what’s in the Bible, but by the fact that they don’t know what’s in it.

This *Acts from the Heart* is written primarily for that person, the adult who has little or no Bible background. It is not another translation, or another “version” of the Bible. Nor is it in the form of a novel. It is simply a re-telling of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, found in the New Testament.

As such, it is also intended to be especially useful for teachers of Sunday school classes and teachers of Bible study groups.

The shy reader may relax. Though there is something of the writer’s sense of the faith woven into the book, there is no insistence that the reader accept a formulated set of doctrines.

The serious student of the Bible may also relax. Though every effort is made to keep the language fresh and effective for lay persons, a concerned effort is also made to present a sound book from a scholar's point of view. *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Erdman's *The Acts, An Exposition*, and the commentary of the *New Clarendon Bible* are some of the resources scoured for understanding and perspective.

In addition, a variety of Bible translations was read in the preparation of the book. *Today's English Version*, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, *The Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, *Concordant Literal New Testament*, and *The New English Bible* are among those read and compared by the writer.

The re-telling of Acts needs a touch of imagination, too. In his essay *On John Dryden*, Macaulay writes, "His imagination resembled the wings of an ostrich. It enabled him to run, though not to soar."

Ostrich-wing imagination is exactly what we've tried to use in this book. It enables us to show how characters might think and feel, but it never flies high enough to alter the story as presented in the Bible.

The author feels especially concerned that there be no misunderstanding as this re-telling of the Book of Acts unfolds. There are some scenes in the story that, if taken out of context, could feed into pre-existing prejudices. There are "bad guys" in the Book of Acts: sometimes they are Roman officials, sometimes they are Ephesian silver-smiths, sometimes they are Samaritan magicians, and sometimes they are Jewish religionists.

No group has experienced the slings of organized

hatred more consistently or more viciously than Jews. So it is important to keep in mind that Jews are also the *heroes* of this story — valiant men and women who see one of their own, Jesus, as the fulfillment of their faith, and who risk their very lives to proclaim “He is risen!”

And finally, a word to those who may be bothered by the use of humor in a book about the Bible. That most prolific of poets, Anonymous, wrote of German mothers who:

“Wind in, throughout the yarn their girlyies knit  
Some trinkets small, and tiny shining coins,  
That when the little fingers weary grow...  
From out the ball will drop the hidden gift  
To please and urge them on in search for more...”

If a little humor is uncovered as this ball of yarn is unraveled, it is there to please the readers and urge them on in search for more. In the process, they may be knitting a background for faith. (Or at the very least a cure for the “uh, er, heh, heh” stammers.)



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## CHAPTER ONE

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Once upon a true story, there was a motley crew of fishermen and other sinners who had a very close mutual friend. They were twelve in number, all specifically hand-picked by that friend. For three years, they listened to him and loved him, and assisted him, all the while discovering who he really was, this man, one Jesus of Nazareth.

They had, in fact, all left their respective jobs to go with their friend as he padded from village to city to village, preaching and teaching and even healing people.

Then, swiftly, a terrible thing happened. Their friend was executed by the state as a rebel. He had offended some important people by having some new ideas about God and God's intentions. God-and-God's-Intentions was the specialized field of these otherwise sensible people. Thus Jesus of Nazareth was a terrible threat to their status. So he was marched out to a hill, pounded to a wooden frame, and speared through the side. That certainly should have been the end of that. Jesus of Nazareth was executed, dead and buried.

For his friends, three years of exhilarating fellowship had crumpled into three days of stunned grief. But they really should have known better, those twelve confidants. They

really should have known there was to be something more.

Suddenly, there flung itself across the world an astounding and beautiful reality. Jesus of Nazareth had overcome his death! He had simply overpowered it! He was returned and walking again among those who loved him!

This is the great, good news that so gripped the Jewish community in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. For centuries before that, years of surprisingly well-recorded history, the Jews had been yearning for a great leader, a rescuer, a savior, a Messiah. Then along came this appealing young Jew who touched the deepest longing of the common people with his authoritative, yet sort of mystic, knowledge of the Kingdom of God, and his strange, sometimes veiled, talk about living again in three days if he were to die.

Well, he was right. You can't keep a good man down. Some how, some marvelous, mysterious, dazzling how, he burst the bonds of death in three days, and came back — alive!

For many Jews, his springing to life again was all the proof they needed that he was their man, their main man, their Messiah person. Obviously, though, those who had arranged for his execution could not accept this. After all, the rulers of these Jews of Jerusalem had had him killed because they were jealous. These men had studied the very complex Jewish law all of their lives, and had achieved a position of high importance within it. It simply turned them into jelly beans to have a young rebel come along and publicly question everything they had ever stood for.

Oh, Jesus knew Jewish law, all right. The problem was, he kept pointing out that it had become rigid and sterile.

The law said “Keep the Sabbath holy.” He thought it holy to heal on the Sabbath. The law said, “An eye for an eye.” He said “Love your enemies.”

Further, that ability of his to heal people also upset some of the Jewish rulers—a lot. Suddenly, a blind man could see, a lame man could walk, a sick man was restored to vigor—and a wandering preacher could draw a bigger crowd than the leaders of the Temple.

To be fair, jealousy was not the only reason the conservative Jews could not accept Jesus as Messiah. There was disappointment, too. For centuries the Messiah the Jews had been expecting was a political Messiah, someone who, through the power of their God, would take them out of subservience and into political glory.

What they got in Jesus was someone who reminded them in a thousand ways that God loved them and forgave them their sins, and wanted them as a nation to tell the rest of the world about God’s love. Now, what kind of a Messiah was that supposed to Be?

So, the rulers of the Jews could see that many of their people were caught up in a movement over which they as leaders had no control, and which had at its head no glorious military leader, but only a man just like themselves — sort of. They began to look on Jesus as a dangerous radical. They had to get him out of their hair — and fast.

Cleverly, they decided to use legal channels to do this. They would use their nation’s hope for a political Messiah to frame this man. They would get him into trouble with the other ruler of that day and that place: the great Roman Empire, nothing less.

— *From the Gospels*





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## CHAPTER TWO

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What ancient monster has two heads, and wears a rabbi's skullcap on one, and a Roman helmet on the other? Right — the Jerusalem of Jesus' day.

Two separate sets of rulers headed up the affairs of that rowdy city: the Jews to whom the city historically belonged, and the Romans to whom it now belonged by force.

The Romans were the current yolk the Jews thought a Messiah ought to come shake off. Jerusalem was awash with Roman soldiers. Soldiers were even garrisoned in a corner of the Temple area, the great holy sanctuary of the Jews.

Still, as conquerors go, the Romans weren't all bad. They did allow the Jews to maintain their own religious government, while the Romans conducted civil affairs. Even so, the Jews were not exactly scintillated about being under the submission of the Romans.

It must be said, however, that when it came to using Roman law for their own purposes, some of the Jewish rulers could handle that. For instance, here was this man Jesus, striding around the countryside, drawing huge crowds around him, contradicting the conservative teachings of the rabbis, and becoming a terrible threat to the authority

of the Jewish rulers. An alarming number of ordinary Jews were beginning to think Jesus was indeed the Messiah they'd spent the last two thousand years expecting — and who needs a rabbi when you've got a Messiah? Obviously, the rulers had to find a way to be rid of this person. But how do you kill off an exciting Messiah-type without jeopardizing your own popularity?

As it turned out, Jesus obligingly wrote his own summons. When asked if he were the Messiah, he would not deny it. It was perfect. Jesus had thereby provided the ruling Jews with a charge they could arrest him on — heresy — *and* a charge they could frame him with for trial by the Romans — treason.

So, one dark night they did arrest Jesus. They accosted him in a garden where he had gone to pray. Some of his twelve special friends were with him at the time. Apparently they were not also targets for arrest. Even so, the arrest of Jesus must have thoroughly frightened and appalled them.

Still, one of them, a fisherman named Peter, managed to follow the arresting party at a safe distance. Peter saw Jesus hustled to the home of the Jewish high priest. If the hope of the arresting rulers was that their late-night activity would attract little attention, they were wrong. The arrest of Jesus, a highly popular and highly controversial figure, was nothing less than sensational. A crowd was already milling around the courtyard adjoining the high priest's house, and Peter folded himself into it.

Someone there lit a bonfire against the night air. Peter huddled close to it, undoubtedly shivering both from cold and from shock. Oops, bad move! It was quite possibly

the light from that fire that made it easier for some in the crowd to see and recognize Peter.

A servant girl was the first to spot him. She stared at Peter for a moment or two, then announced for all the world: "This man was with the man they arrested!"

So much for Peter's anonymity.

But Peter was not ready to go public. "Woman, I don't even know the guy!" he blurted.

And so much for Peter's loyalty.

The girl apparently let the matter drop, but Peter was not to be let off so easily. Only a few minutes later, another person accused him: "You are one of his friends!"

"I'm not either!" he insisted, quite possibly wondering how long his nose had got to.

Again the deception worked for awhile, but only awhile. About an hour later, Peter's cover was blown entirely.

"This man was *too* with him," a third person urged. "The two are from the same territory! That proves it!"

"Man, I don't even know what you are talking about!" It was a moment of utter anguish for Peter. Earlier Jesus had told him this would happen, that Peter would not have the courage to admit knowing Jesus if there should be trouble.

Now, at this precise moment of Peter's denial, Jesus, quite possibly in shock himself, turned and looked directly at his friend.

Peter was devastated. He went outside and cried like a baby.

— From the Gospels



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## CHAPTER THREE

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"Are you King of the Jews?"

"So you say."

"Aha! See? A rival king!"

It was a clever question, asked of Jesus by the Jewish rulers as he stood trial before the Roman governor.

It was a clever answer, too — not confirming, not denying.

It was also a clever trap. His accusers knew that to the Romans, a rival king was synonymous with treason.

From the record, however, it doesn't appear that the Roman on hand, governor Pilate, was all that convinced that Jesus wanted to become King, Roman or Jewish. But Pilate felt trapped by the will — or rather the whim — of the mobs who had been frenzied up by the Jewish leaders.

So, as we have already seen, in the end they executed Jesus; and as we have already seen, it didn't permanently take — Jesus came wondrously back to his friends.

News of that fact, that fresh and clamorous and incredible fact, surged through the land like a Pegasus unbridled — winged, powerful, grace-ful. This is what Luke, St. Luke if you will, writes of so eloquently in the gospel called (surprise!) the Gospel of Luke. It is also the background

of, and the central focus for, the sweeping history and personal story he continues to relate in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Or, for those who prefer a first name basis, just Acts.

Luke, it is generally thought, was a physician. Judging from his writings, he was probably also a pretty fair sailor. Or maybe a pretty swarthy one, who knows?

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are really a two-part correspondence that physician-sailor-writer Luke wrote to a friend. (Though the two parts are separated in our Bible, scholars sometimes refer to them as one treatise, Luke-Acts. Together they form the largest body of material from one author in the New Testament.)

From that two-part letter, we get only a sketchy picture of the man to whom it was written, a man named Theophilus. To non-Greek ears, Theophilus must seem like about the awfules' name a fond mother could give her surprised little kid. But it meant something special in those days and for those times. It meant "Lover of God."

Luke addresses Theophilus as "your excellency," so we suspect Theo was an officer in the Roman army. It's possible he was living in Rome.

A man in Theophilus' position would surely already know at least a little about this new faith that Luke has embraced. After all, people were saying it had turned the world upside down. Luke even acknowledges that Theophilus did know a little. Still, somewhere between 64 and 85 A.D., just to be sure the record is straight, Luke picks up some papyrus and writes as one who has participated in all those things that took place in and around Jerusalem because of Jesus.

In so doing, he sets the record straight for our time, too. And he does it with a flair: there is something for everyone in the Book of Acts. For adventure fans there are good guys and bad guys, narrow escapes, a dandy shipwreck, confrontation with heads of state, and miracles along the way. For history buffs, the Book of Acts is “You Are There” all over again, as the infant church grows before our very eyes from a mere one hundred twenty believers in Jerusalem to thousands of believers spread even into Italy and Greece. And for the devotees of the occult and the spiritual — well, for them Acts offers the real prize: the biggest unexplained mystery of all time — the coming to life again, the actual resurrection, of one who had — publicly and dreadfully — died.

Why was Luke so anxious to document his faith and the history of those years? Because for years he had been playing “You Bet Your Life.” He had bet his life on an idea — more than that, really — on a new dimension of reality. He had become a follower of a new way of believing, a new way of living, and that way shook the established society to its ancient roots. The emergence of that new faith, its composition, persecution, survival and triumph make up the story Luke tells his friend Theophilus.

As we re-tell Luke’s Book of Acts, pick up a New Testament and check out for yourself Luke’s personal correspondence to that Roman fellow with the funny name.





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## CHAPTER FOUR

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O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?

So rang the cry of triumph around Jerusalem that early spring. Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, dead and buried, was alive and well and living in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared to too many people on too many different occasions for his return to be disbelieved. So Luke tells us in Acts 1:3.

Now, what does one who has actually gotten over being dead sit around and talk about with his overcrawed friends? Why, the Kingdom of God, of course — just what he'd always talked about. The forty days of Jesus' resurrection appearances were a sort of seal upon the three years of his ministry.

But those forty days have finally come down to last moments, and Jesus has two more things he wants to say to his friends. First, he gives them some last minute instructions: "Stay put. Don't leave Jerusalem yet."

Secondly, he makes them a promise: "In a few days you will receive a special gift. You know about baptism with water. Now you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So now the disciples have this promise that something special is going to happen to them in connection with Jesus.

However, sometimes the disciples are not too swift. After three years of listening to Jesus, asking him questions and sharing his friendship — to say nothing of living with his presence those forty resurrection days — they still cannot resist the political hope that he is there to throw off the yoke of Roman rule over Israel.

“Lord, is this it?” they have to ask. “Is this the time the kingdom will be given back to Israel?”

Jesus’ answer is clear. “God alone knows when that will happen. It’s really not of your concern.”

If the answer seems crisp, perhaps it is because Jesus has something else on his mind: his promise that these most ordinary, “just folks” kind of men will be filled with power from the Holy Spirit.

Once more he tells them of it. “You will even find the courage to leave your homes and travel all over the world to tell people about me.”

It is a promise, sure, but that last part sounds very like a command, too.

This promise/command is to be Jesus’ last word to his friends/disciples. Having spoken it, he just sort of rises up and floats off to heaven. One cannot blame his friends for staring after him, probably open-mouthed. It takes a question from a couple of strangers to bring their attention back down to earth, so to speak.

“What’s up, guys? Why are you all standing around star-gazing?”

The question comes from two men dressed in white who have suddenly joined the disciples. Without waiting for an answer, they offer the disciples exactly the sort of reassurance one would need in such a situation: “This man

Jesus that you just saw rise into heaven — he'll be back. He'll come back in the same way he left. You'll see."

Satisfied, the disciples walk the half-mile from the Mount of Olives, where all this has taken place, back to Jerusalem. There they will wait. Their best friend is still in command.

For twentieth century sophisticates, the picture of Jesus floating off to heaven may be difficult to believe. Still, writer Luke believed it, and the account certainly serves to tell us there was a defined occasion after which the disciples experienced no further resurrection appearances.

Who were the men in white? Angels, of course. They had a message for the disciples. Every angel has a message for somebody. The word "angel" means "messenger." If these two in the ascension record are too much for you to believe, at least recognize that the account is entirely consistent with other stories in the Bible. There were angels at Jesus' coming into the world. There were angels at his resurrection. And now there are angels at his going out of the world. The presence of the two at the ascension is, in addition, entirely consistent with the nature of the man Jesus. He sent them to give immediate reassurance to his surely bewildered disciples.

"He'll come back," the men in white said. And the men in fisherman's clothes believed.

— Acts 1: 1-11



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## CHAPTER FIVE

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"What's past is prologue," Will Shakespeare volunteered one day.

Jesus said it first, in an oblique sort of way, just before he left his disciples. "Wait here," he told them. "The Holy Spirit is going to come and send you off to tell the world about me."

Thus, all that his disciples had gone through with Jesus, and all that they had learned from him, becomes prologue-preparation for the drama that will drape itself around them for the rest of their lives.

The suspense must be monumental. The disciples do not know exactly what they are to wait for, nor when it will come. They know only that they are to be baptized by the Holy Spirit — whatever *that* is to mean.

So they wait, and while they do, they rent a second story walk-up, welcome others in regularly for prayer, and settle down to some unfinished business.

Among those attending a prayer meeting are Jesus' mother and his brothers. The total number of believers is now up to a surprising one hundred and twenty. It is to this group gathered together, not to the original disciples alone, that Peter says, in effect, "Well, gang, one of our

engines is missing and ought to be replaced."

The "engine" in question is a man named Judas. It was he who led the arresting party to Jesus that night in the garden. Judas' defection from the twelve, and his subsequent death, has left the circle incomplete. Symbolically, that is unsatisfying for the disciples. Probably more than any other people in the world, the Jews are a history-conscious people. One of their early fathers, Jacob, had had twelve sons, from whom sprang the twelve tribes known as the nation of Israel. The twelve disciples see themselves as a symbol of a new Israel, the Israel whose yearning for a Messiah has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. That's why Peter feels the need to make the circle of twelve complete again.

Peter's modest speech suggesting that they select someone is in itself a minor miracle. Remember that fearful soul who panicked the night of Jesus' arrest? Here he is again, with his composure all regained and his sense of purpose all revived. He is, it would appear, all ready to be a leader.

Peter begins his speech by quoting a psalm, leaning heavily on the authority of Scripture to support his "We-ought-to-replace-Judas" contention.

At this point, writer Luke interrupts his own recounting of Peter's speech for a moment, to review the story of Judas' death. His version of what happened to Judas varies strangely with that of other New Testament material. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Judas felt so guilty about turning Jesus over to his executioners that he hanged himself. The money with which he had been bribed to betray Jesus was then used to buy a burial field for poor people. But in Luke's version Judas himself buys

a field with his bribery money. Then one day, as he was maybe out jogging in it, he falls down and suffers a severe gaping abdominal injury. To put it briefly (and crudely!) he became the original gutless wonder, and died.

Having related that bit of cheerful pleasantness, writer Luke continues with Peter's speech. Two qualifications for being considered one of the twelve are spelled out by Peter. The new man has to be someone who has been with the disciples from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And he has to be willing to tell others of that stunning event, the resurrection.

The believers nominate two men for the honor, one named Joseph, one named Matthias. First they all pray for guidance, then they draw lots. Matthias wins. Apparently everybody (with the possible exception of Joseph) is perfectly satisfied that their Lord has made the choice.

More than just the selection of Judas' replacement has happened here. Peter has said the new man must be willing to tell others of Jesus' return to life. In so saying, Peter has defined the central theme of the early church: the resurrection. All that follows in the book of Acts is seen in the light of, and is given meaning by, the power and the joy of that event.

— Acts 1: 12-26





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## CHAPTER SIX

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The art of twiddling the thumbs is apparently not the disciples' most fully developed skill. While waiting around for something to happen in Jerusalem, per Jesus' last request, they hold prayer meetings with other believers, choose a successor to Judas, and reaffirm their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Altogether, it is not a bad ten days of waiting.

At last, the holiday called Pentecost rolls around. Once a harvest festival, Pentecost has now come to be a celebration of the Jewish law. Its name comes from the ancient Greek word for "fifty" because it falls fifty days after that other ancient Jewish observance, Passover. (And that, my dear Watson, is how we know the disciples waited in Jerusalem approximately ten days: the death of Jesus occurred at Passover time, and Luke records forty days of resurrection appearances, so — that leaves ten days till Pentecost.)

On the morning of the celebration we find the whole group of one hundred twenty believers gathered together to observe Pentecost in the usual ways. As it turns out, this was not to be your usual Pentecost.

Is there conversation that morning? Laughter? Solemn reading of scriptural law? Suddenly, it is all violently

interrupted, sheared apart by a tremendous banging clangor from the sky. A sound like a driving, rushing, mighty wind — a blare — reverberates through the whole house.

Almost simultaneously with the blast, come flashes of light, tongues of fire spreading out and touching each person present. So *this* is what Jesus meant! “Stay in Jerusalem,” he had said. “In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and you will receive power.”

Wow! Some power! Holy Spirit made manifest and poured onto the whole gathered group of believers!

Suddenly, as could be expected following such a breathtaking event, the believers are all talking at once. But to their own amazement, they speak in a variety of languages. And if *they* were astonished, imagine the curiosity of the crowd that gathers around, drawn by the cackle of voices. Many hundreds of Jews from outlying districts have crowded into Jerusalem because of Pentecost. To great surprise all around, each one present hears the believers in his or her own native language. It is uncanny, unbelievable.

“What is it? What’s it all about?” some buzz excitedly.

Others shrug at the whole incident, calling it a drunken brawl. That does it, as far as Peter is concerned. Up he stands, to put that rumor down with a very practical observation.

“Don’t be silly,” he says in effect. “These people aren’t drunk — it is only nine o’clock in the morning!”

This is Peter’s finest hour. With the other eleven disciples standing beside him, he roars to the crowd his passionate belief in the resurrection of his friend Jesus.

Very wisely, he draws on Jewish Scripture, first to convince these devout Jews that something very deeply

religious has happened here, and then to show why he believes Jesus is the Messiah they have been expecting so long. Just as politicians think it's neat to drop the name of Abraham Lincoln, so Peter quotes from the prophet Joel and from King David, to prove his faithfulness to his Jewish roots. Yet over and over again, he hammers home his new message, the resurrection: "God has raised this very Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses to this fact."

Fisherman Peter must be a bit surprised at himself for this venture into public speaking. And he must be amazed at the effectiveness of his speech. Those present are so moved by it that they call the disciples "brothers" and want to know what they should do.

The answer is touchingly simple: "Just ask forgiveness for your sins and be baptized, and you will be forgiven." There is no qualifying statement, no forfeit to endure. There is only the loving promise that "you and your children—and all who hear and accept this good news—will receive the Holy Spirit."

To cover all bases in case the gentle plea doesn't work, Peter also throws in the threat of punishment to wicked folks.

Something works. Three thousand persons "come forward." Three thousand! In one magnificent morning the little band of one hundred twenty believers has become a force that is now to be reckoned with through all the rest of history.



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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Thought up any good metaphors lately? (As if normal people lie awake nights thinking up metaphors.)

For those who haven't met a metaphor since high school, it's a word picture that changes a subject into another image. For instance, "Happiness is a warm puppy" is a most appealing metaphor of recent years. Another one, "Her teeth are pearls," is the first line of an old joke. (The punch line does away with the metaphor, but we can't leave you dangling: "Pearl didn't want them anymore.")

And, certainly, "The Lord is my shepherd" is a most picturesque and enduring metaphor.

The earliest church, as Luke writes of it in the Book of Acts, almost cries out for metaphorical description. For instance, after the astounding Pentecost experience, the early believers went through a period of utter, exhilarating joy. Coupled with that, perhaps springing from it, was a deep and generous and concerned love for each other. So, metaphorically speaking, the early church was a tender embrace.

The three thousand who were baptized on that wonderful day of Pentecost were eager to learn more of this man Jesus, this savior of Israel. The original believers spent

a great deal of time with the newcomers, teaching them and praying with them. The early church was, then, a metaphorical mother cat, nurturing all her kittens (new believers) from separate sources (individual instructors within the fellowship), but all from her one warm body (the fellowship of believers.)

So intertwined with each other were the members of the early church, that a sort of communalism developed. No need went unmet. It was not unusual for a person to sell some of his or her own property, to give the money for distribution to those in need. So the beginning church was a potluck dinner, to which some could bring meat and wine, and others could bring but bread and milk, but all sat together at the same table.

The Spirit of God was in the early fellowship, filling it with wonder and giving it an unearthly energy. Many miracles and wonders were done through those first believers, perhaps even to their own amazement. Thus the young church was a transformer. It received energy that was not of itself, and transmitted it as power, as miracle.

We have seen that the believers held regular prayer meetings in homes. But they also showed up for traditional services in the Temple everyday. In fact, they showed up as a group. After all, these believers were still good Jewish faithfuls. They simply saw their belief in the resurrection as the flowering of their ancient faith, the fruit of it. So the earliest church was an acorn, grown full on the parent tree, the Jewish faith, and now ready to sprout on its own.

The early church was a family, too, as the believers shared their meals, eating at each other's homes, glad to be together.

It was also a hymn of praise to the risen Lord, as the sheer joy of the resurrection fellowship called forth prayers of gratitude.

And finally, Luke tells us, the earliest church enjoyed the goodwill of all the people (although this would soon change dramatically.) More and more people joined the fellowship every single day during these early weeks. Obviously, some deep need within them responded to Jesus' resurrection. The early church was therefore a clear, running stream around which those who were thirsty gathered to drink.

So we see that at its moment of earliest life, the church was a tender embrace, a mother cat, a potluck dinner, a transformer, an acorn, a family, a hymn, a sparkling stream. In other words, the early believers went about loving, nourishing, providing, performing miracles, recognizing their roots, being a family, praising God, and renewing life.

Not bad, for beginners.

— Acts 2: 42-47





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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Who gets arrested just when everything seems to be going so right for those who believe in Jesus' resurrection? Peter, of course, and John, another of Jesus' twelve special friends.

But what a difference in Peter! The guy who chickened out so pathetically on the night of Jesus' arrest is now going around fearlessly proclaiming his belief in the resurrection, and gladly going to jail for his convictions.

He and John are on their way to the Temple for prayers when a beggar does what beggars are supposed to do: he asks for some money. This beggar had been born with totally useless legs. He had to be carried every day to his begging place beside the gate of the Temple.

Peter and John must have seen him a hundred times, and had probably dropped a coin or two into his cup in the past. But today is to be different. In the first place you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, and today Peter and John are financial turnips. But more than that, they now have something better to offer this crippled man: the healing of his legs.

"Walk!" says Peter, taking him by the hand. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, I tell you, you can

walk!"

The beggar springs to his feet. He paces around, possibly a little gingerly. Into the Temple he follows Peter and John, leaping now and dancing and praising God for this gift of wholeness.

People come running from all directions to get in on the excitement. On what is known as Solomon's Porch, the beggar clings to the two by-now-somewhat-flustered miracle workers. But the beggar is surely in great joy (and probably in great exhaustion.)

Peter and John are embarrassed because a crowd is gathering. "What are you staring at?" growls Peter. "What have you got to be so surprised about? We didn't make this man walk! Your own God has given divine glory to his son Jesus."

Peter has caught the crowd's attention. Now he unleashes some very strong feelings.

"You are responsible for Jesus' death, you know. He was pure and just, but that didn't matter to you. You had the chance to let Pilate release him and you didn't take it."

Then, moving swiftly to his point, he victoriously flings to the crowd the theme melody of this Book of Acts: "But God raised Jesus from the dead — and we are witnesses to this!" It is, he insists, the power of the risen Christ that gave the beggar back his legs, not any power that he or John has.

He calls to the crowd to turn back to God, to repent. The promise is strong: "Your sins will be wiped out." And being the good Jew that he is, Peter quotes from what we now know as Old Testament scripture. He reminds the

crowd that their prophets have predicted the coming of Jesus for centuries. He reminds them of God's promise to Abraham: "Through your descendants, I will bless all the people of the earth."

All the while Peter is giving this impromptu speech, trouble brews for him and John. It is an "establishment" vs. "new belief" problem. The Sadducees, a powerful priestly sect of Jews, did not believe in resurrection or after-life of any kind. (It has been suggested that is why they were so sad, you see.)

Peter's glowing resurrection words to the crowd, obviously spoken with deep personal feeling, are a terrible threat to the Sadducees. Unwilling to have anyone publicly suggest they are wrong about resurrection, they call the Temple guard and have Peter and John arrested. It is already late afternoon. Peter and John cannot be tried until the next day. So the two friends find themselves in jail over night.

In spite of the hassle of that afternoon, Peter's message is not lost upon the crowd. His unrehearsed, straight-from-the-heart talk causes a great many persons to join the fold of believers. The total now comes to about 5000.

Even so, the arrest of Peter and John must have been terribly distressing to the other believers. We can imagine that fervent prayers are lifted on behalf of Peter and John that night. The experience is the first small wave of increasingly afflictive storms that are to wash over the community of believers. It was not unpredicted. Jesus had said, "You will be brought before kings and rulers for my sake." The persecution of the believers in Christ has begun.



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## CHAPTER NINE

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Peter and John are in jail. For jay-walking? For not throwing back an undersized fish? For keeping chickens within the city limits? Nope. Nothing so simple. Peter and John are in prison for telling people that Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead.

It happened that they had healed the legs of a man born lame. Then, as a crowd gathered, they gave credit to the risen Christ for the man's wholeness. It also happened that there were Sadducees in the crowd, who, not believing in resurrection, were very threatened by the speech of Peter and John. They were also powerful enough to do something about it. So — voila! — Peter and John were hustled off to jail for the night, probably on a charge of heresy.

Rulers and elders and lawyers and high priests hover over the hearing that is held the next morning. This resurrection faith is fast becoming a “won't go away” issue, jolting the foundation of 2000 years of relative religious stability. This legal assemblage is realistic enough to know there is no way to deny that a miracle has taken place. First, everybody knows the man was born lame; second, lots of people saw him hopping around healed the day before; and third, there he is now, gratefully standing beside

Peter and John, almost as if he were on trial too. So the hearing begins with a question put to Peter and John that is probably geared to appear merely curious: "How did you do it? What kind of power did you use?"

But Peter isn't playing any games; he knows the real question is, Did you or did you not preach about resurrection? Then, feeling a sense of well-being in the Holy Spirit, he cuts to the heart of the issue: "If you're asking how this man was healed, I'll tell you, and all the people of Israel: It was through the name of Jesus of Nazareth—" then comes the zinger — "whom you crucified —" followed by what is now Peter's favorite phrase: "— whom God raised from the dead!"

He goes on to borrow a bit of imagery from the Psalms: "As builders of the faith, you discarded this stone who is Jesus, and now he turns out to be the cornerstone. He is the only way by which we may be saved."

Such boldness from men who had no formal theological training! The gathered court is puzzled — until they recognize Peter and John as actual companions to Jesus before his death.

The court also recognizes that with the former lame man standing right there in their midst, there really is no way they can get away with punishing these two. The miracle has caught the imagination of the people. Frustrated, the rulers order the defendants and their ambulatory friend to leave the room. They need to discuss this thing in private.

The conversation probably runs something like this:  
"Now what do we do?"

"Not much. Let's face it, everybody knows a miracle

has taken place.”

“True, but we ought to make them stop spreading this resurrection thing any further.”

“How?”

“How about a gag order? No more speaking in the name of Jesus.”

So Peter and John are brought back into court and told that they must never speak or teach again in the name of Jesus.

“Aw, c’mon —” Peter says in effect. “Think about it! Should we be obeying you or God? We can’t stop speaking of what we’ve seen with our own eyes.”

Apparently, the court has no answer. It simply gives the two a second warning, and then releases them.

Naturally, Peter and John go straight to the fellowship of believers. They tell their friends of the court’s gag rule, which will affect them all. With no hesitation, and no discussion of the pros and cons of civil disobedience, the gathered group prays for courage to defy the court, and to do so boldly. They also pray that more miracles may be performed in the name of Jesus.

They needn’t have worried. Immediately they receive a sign of God’s intent: the room in which they are meeting is shaken, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is a sort of aftershock of the Pentecost experience. The boldness, the power the believers have so earnestly prayed for is immediately theirs. In spite of court order or even prison, they will now and for all of their lives speak God’s message without fear.





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## CHAPTER TEN

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So thrilled are the believers by the resurrection that they experience a period of exquisite unity of spirit. It is as if they have but one heart and one mind among them.

To illustrate this, writer Luke introduces Barnabas. He records that Barnabas sells a piece of his own property and turns all of the money over to the church.

Probably the reason Luke singles Barnabas out is that Barnabas plays a very important role later in Acts. However, Luke is careful to note that Barnabas is not the only person among the believers to sell property for the benefit of all. As those early believers share with each other everything they have, God pours rich blessings on them all.

In stark contrast to all that loveliness, there comes a strange and tragic incident for which there seems to be no comfortable explanation.

Among the members of the fellowship are a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They too have some property, and they too sell it and give the money to the believers. Well, they give *some* of it, anyway. Trouble is, they say it is all of their money.

As Peter tells Ananias, their dishonesty is not in holding back the money. After all, there was no compulsion or

rule that said they had to give it to the believers. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira is in lying about it.

So Peter confronts Ananias before the other believers, and insists that Ananias has lied not to humans, but to God. Ananias' response is surely more than Peter bargains for: he drops dead, right there in front of everybody.

The fellowship is stunned. Some of the younger, stronger men cover his body, and carry him out to bury him. Luke, writing of the incident, knows his "audience" will be familiar with the customs of the day, so he doesn't bother to fill in a lot of details. He has no idea that 2000 years later we might read his story and come up wondering if the believers buried poor Ananias under some handy fig tree in the back yard. But fear not. Their haste to bury him was custom, not clandestine. It was — and is — the Jewish custom to bury the dead quickly, with little fanfare. It is highly likely that Ananias reposes in a thoroughly proper cemetery somewhere in the middle of Jerusalem. At any rate, wherever they put him, it took them three hours to do it.

Just about the time they were finishing up, Sapphira comes along to join Peter's meeting. She is totally unaware of what has happened to her husband. Peter, never a runner-up for Mr. Debonair, snorts at her, "Did you get x number of dollars for your property?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you and Ananias lie about it? Are you trying to test the Lord? The men who have just buried your husband are coming up the walk now, and they'll carry you out feet first, too!"

Whereupon, Sapphira obligingly drops dead also. For

the young men who buried Ananias, it is like an instant replay. They now carry Sapphira out for burial beside her husband.

The whole church is jolted by these events, but Luke doesn't give many clues as to what really happened. How did Peter find out about the discrepancy in the funds to begin with? What happened to Ananias? Was it a heart attack? (There is nothing to indicate that Peter was responsible for Ananias' death. Peter must have been as surprised as the others.)

What happened to Sapphira? The coincidence of a husband and wife dying unexpectedly within three hours of each other is not unheard of, but did Peter really predict her death?

No wonder the whole church and everyone else who heard what happened were filled with fear. Was the couple's unfaithfulness being punished? If so, how did the believers reconcile this with the resurrection message of forgiveness?

However the story is interpreted, it is a puzzler. But it does serve to introduce Barnabas, whom we'll soon come to know and love. And it does illustrate the great goodness with which the fellowship of believers enveloped themselves, as well as the terrible shock to the community brought on by contrast to that grace.

And there is an interesting footnote to the incident. For the first time in the book of Acts the word "church" is used: "And a great awe fell upon the whole church." Those who believe in the resurrection are coming into their own. They are the new Israel. They are the church.



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Well, Peter's in jail again. All that business with Ananias and Sapphira apparently wasn't even worth questioning. But just let him do a little healing in the name of his resurrected Lord, and he's slammed into jail every time.

It happens that for a time the believers enjoy a high reputation in the community. More and more men and women — a crowd, Luke says — join with them.

But there is danger. So much danger that those who are not yet believers dare not be seen at the believers' meetings in the Temple. They are afraid of the jealousy of the powerful Temple rulers.

Nothing, however, diminishes the intense excitement generated by the healing miracles. The sick are even carried into the streets. The hope is that Peter's shadow might fall on them, and they will be healed. Crowds stream in from outlying towns, carrying their sick. And their sick are healed.

What the ruling Sadducees see, however, is a handful of ordinary fishermen somehow healing people, and saying it is all done by the power of a man who has died and come to life again. The Sadducees feel their status is terribly threatened. They do not believe in resurrection. For them

is it pure blasphemy.

It is also grounds for arrest. Thus Peter is carted off to jail once more, and so are some of the other disciples.

But not for long! One of the most unfathomable escapes on record occurs that night. What really happens is probably acceptable only to believers. But to believers it makes a great deal of sense: An angel, a messenger of the Lord, simply unlocks the gates and frees Peter and his friends.

However, the angel isn't sent to Peter and the others just because the Lord likes them a lot. They are freed for a specific purpose. They are told: "Go and stand in the Temple and tell people all about this new life!"

They didn't have to be told twice. As dawn comes over Jerusalem, there they are, standing in the Temple, preaching the resurrection once more.

Meanwhile, back in the courtroom, the Sanhedrin is gathering. The Sanhedrin, or Council, is the official governing body of the Jews. It consists of seventy members, plus the high priest, who presides over it. It is a formidable court to be brought before.

The Sanhedrin calls for the prisoners. Whoops! They have disappeared from jail! The Council is baffled. While members of this august body are murmuring around, wondering what the dickens has happened, someone comes running up to report, "The men you put in prison are standing in the Temple. They're preaching again!"

Immediately, a guard is dispatched to pick the men up. But this time the "police" are determined to keep a low profile, lest the crowd should turn into a mob. Peter and friends are quickly brought before the 70-plus-one.

And the one, the high priest, harking back to Peter's previous record, says, "I thought you were ordered not to preach any more using the name of that man Jesus. Yet here you are again, flooding the city with your weird ideas. I think you intend to get the people to blame us for Jesus' death."

The answer of Peter and the others is a kind of four-point mini-creed. (None of which does much to reassure the court.)

Point 1: "Our loyalty is to God, not to human beings!" (What could the Council say to that?) Point 2: "The God of our parents roused Jesus from death after you nailed him to a cross." (That resurrection thing again, plus outright accusation.) Point 3: "God lifted Jesus to be our champion and savior so that he could offer the people of Israel the chance to repent and have their sins pardoned." (A mere man that everyone had known? Sacrilege!) Point 4: "We are witnesses to these things." (Irrefutable. there is no way the Sanhedrin is going to convince actual witnesses to the resurrection that it didn't happen.)

That last point has a clincher: "We are witnesses to these things — we and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes as a gift from God to all who obey God."

Maybe it is the implication that members of the court do not know the Holy Spirit because they are not obedient to God. Maybe it is the renewed talk about resurrection. Whatever the cause, the court becomes absolutely red-faced furious.

Swiftly, a sentence is handed down. It has a cruel and final ring to it: Death to Peter and those arrested with him.

— Acts 5: 12-33





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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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It must be a heart-stopping moment for the community of believers. Peter, who has so impassioned them all with his ardor for the risen Christ, is now to be lost to them. So are some of the other believers. In the eyes of the religious hierarchy, they have overstepped the line from personal belief to blasphemy. And in Jerusalem, blasphemy amounts to a sort of treason, punishable by death.

But among the seventy-man court that convicted them, is one hold-out juror. His name is Gamaliel, and he is a highly respected lawyer. First he orders the prisoners to be put outside. Then he addresses the Council.

"Hold your horses, gentlemen," he says in effect. "Maybe we'd be better off to leave these men alone. Remember Theudas? He thought he was really somebody, but his little movement died when he did. Remember Judas the Galilean? Same story. Now as to these men in our custody: when you think about it, if this resurrection movement is of their own making, it won't last long anyway. But if it is of God, there is no way we can stop it!"

(Scholars today believe that the mention of Theudas and Judas the Galilean is an anachronism. That is, Luke, writing Acts years after these events, threw in a little history

that happened after the time of Peter's arrest. No matter. His point is not lost, and neither is Gamaliel's.)

Finally, the court calms down. The death sentence is reduced to a sound beating for each of the men. In addition, they are handed another injunction against speaking in the name of Jesus, which is about as effective as posting a "No Trespassing" sign in the path of an approaching whirlwind. The men are then released.

The reaction of Peter and his friends, upon being set free, is fascinating. The deep joy they experience comes not from the fact that they have been freed. It comes instead from the fact that God has considered them *worthy* to be dishonored, to be arrested and tried, for the sake of Jesus.

Court order or no court order, the believers continue to teach and preach about the risen Christ. The roots of the new faith have now grown strong. The church is surging with vibrancy and life. At this point in the narrative, Luke moves from the lofty matters of resurrection and persecution to a very human and practical incident: a quarrel over money matters.

The number of believers has grown so large that the original twelve disciples are beginning to have a hard time running the show. It is the daily distribution of funds to the poor in their fellowship that finally gets to be too much. Apparently, no care has been taken in the bookkeeping, and some people are getting more than others. It is the Greek-speaking Jews who feel left out. These are the Jews whose families have lived in countries predominately Greek in culture, but who have returned to live in the homeland. Their Greek ways and Greek tongue tend to set them apart.

Now they are bringing a sort of class-action complaint to the church leaders.

“Our widows are being neglected,” they claim. The twelve think it over and realize they are spreading themselves too thin. They call a general assembly of all the believers. “We can’t preach and do a good job of handling finances too. Tell you what. Why don’t you select a seven man committee? Choose men who are filled with the Holy Spirit — men you can trust to make good decisions. They will free us to spend more time in prayer and in preaching.”

The believers think this is an okay idea, so the first board of deacons is formed. Among the seven named to it is a young man named Stephen. As we shall soon see, he will become the first believer to die for his faith.

All of the men selected to be deacons are of Greek background. That would seem to be a bit of special graciousness on the part of the native Jews. It is as if they are bending over backward to satisfy their Greek-speaking friends.

A ceremony is held in which the twelve disciples pray over the seven men, and place their hands upon them. It is a ritual much like that of ordination in Christian churches today. And so the new faith continues to spread. Even a number of Temple priests confess their faith in the risen Lord. That is significant. The young church is growing in respectability.

— Acts 5: 34 – 6: 7



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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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*A letter to the mother of Stephen from Peter (a fictional letter, but a true story):*

Dear Friend:

I want you to know that we, believers in Jesus the Christ, are in shock over Stephen's death and the terrible way it happened. We loved him dearly, and had chosen him to be on a special committee to distribute funds to the poor in our fellowship. He seemed to have a special measure of God's grace. He was of a fair and reconciling nature. Maybe more than any of the rest of us, Stephen had power to work miracles. Sadly, the popularity that gift brought him was really the beginning of the end for him.

You see, some religious extremists from one of the synagogues, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, were jealous of him. One day they thought they'd get the best of him in public, embarrass him. Boy, were they ever surprised! Stephen was, as always, so "in tune" with the Holy Spirit, and gave such good answers to their questions, that the Freedmen had to back down.

Well, that went over with them like a concrete canoe, of course. So the whole awful thing began. First, they

actually bribed some men to tell lies against Stephen. They said he was a traitor to God and to Moses. How could anyone believe that? Still, people outside of our fellowship not only believed it, they had him arrested.

The same liars showed up at his trial. There they put it another way — they said he had spoken against the Temple and against the Law. Being a good Jew yourself, you know how crucial the Temple and the Law are to our faith. When that lie was told, I swear all seventy men of the court turned and stared at Stephen. Perhaps they did so in utter surprise. Or maybe they did so in an attempt to judge if he were capable of such blasphemy. In either case, I wish you could have seen Stephen's face at that precise moment! An angel from heaven could not have looked more beautiful!

The high priest finally got to the point. "Stephen, are these charges true?"

Dear friend, you would have been so proud of your son! He stood up and proved his faithfulness by calmly reminding the Sanhedrin of our Jewish history, beginning with Abraham and going right on down to the building of the Temple.

Then, so very suddenly, it seemed as if he could not withhold his anger any longer. He turned on the Council and splashed his feelings out all over them: "You pagans!" (Imagine! He actually called the Sanhedrin *pagans*!) "You pagans! Your ancestors always murdered the men who predicted that Jesus would come! And when he did come, you murdered *him*!"

The Council was furious, of course. But they'd heard all that before. They once sentenced *me* to death, you

remember, though I got off with only a beating.

I wish it were so with poor Stephen! I want you to know, though, — and I hope you can understand this — there was a kind of beauty in his last moments. It appeared to us that he actually saw a flash of heaven. He cried out, “Look! Heaven has opened up! There is the son of man standing at the right hand of God!”

But the Council was in no mood to hear anything about heaven from Stephen. With all the maturity of two-year-olds, they covered their ears with their hands and shouted him down. Suddenly, some of them rushed at Stephen. He ran for his life through city streets and beyond the city wall. But there they smashed him with their rocks.

Bleeding and stunned, your son cried, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” And when at last he had no strength left and had fallen to his knees, he called out his forgiveness: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Stephen’s last words were like an echo of Jesus’ last words. Jesus, too, forgave his murderers. As Jesus overcame his death, so shall Stephen! Be assured of that! Be assured he knew that!

All of us in the fellowship pray now for you and yours. As for us, we are beset, but serene. We do not know what is in store for us; but Stephen, and the grace with which he lived — and died — will always be an inspiration to us.

With greetings and love from all, I remain,  
Your obedient servant,

Peter

*Historical Footnote:* A fanatic young Christ-hater named Saul stood on the sidelines and cheered Stephen’s attackers,

even keeping an eye on their cloaks for them. No one there that tragic day could have known he would later become the great apostle Paul.

— Acts 6: 8 – 8: 1



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Terror and grief must have hit the fellowship of believers like a reverberating gong. One of their most beloved members was dead, his bloody and crushed body lying just outside the city wall. Was Stephen legally executed? Or was he purely and simply murdered? Probably no one really knew: it all happened so fast, and the mob was so wrought up.

For the believers in Christ there is to be absolutely no time that day to sort out the terrible events. Possibly within the hour of Stephen's death — certainly that very day — the believers are to become the victims of a cruel and relentless persecution. A house-to-house "search and destroy" mission is begun against them by that young fanatic, Saul. Saul had gotten his taste for blood when he held the coats of those who crushed Stephen to death with their stones. Now, up one street and down the next he leads his men, dragging men and women out of their homes and throwing them into jail. Understandably, many of the believers flee Jerusalem.

There have been harassment and threats before — but this is the first full-blown, systematic persecution of the believers in Christ. As with those prior harassments, this

persecution comes not from the outside government, not from the Romans, though heaven knows that is to come later. It comes instead from within their own religious heritage. Some in the Jewish hierarchy simply cannot embrace the resurrection of Jesus, and will not allow anyone else to do so.

It becomes Saul's intense purpose to stamp out the resurrection movement completely, to destroy it utterly. But in reality he only kicks the embers of a glowing fire and scatters its sparks in every direction. The refugees pour into the cities of the surrounding districts, Judea and Samaria — and there new fires of the resurrection faith burst out.

Luke, in writing the Book of Acts, gives us a sort of "for instance." He focuses on one person to illustrate the point that persecution spread the faith instead of destroying it. That person is Philip, who had been named to the same committee that Stephen was on, the committee to distribute funds to the widows of Greek-speaking believers. Now we find Philip in the district of Samaria (between Judea and Galilee.) He heals and preaches and brings real hope that Jesus is truly the Messiah. He enjoys remarkable success there. Great joy unites the city as throngs press to see and hear him.

Samaria is a district of vivid history. It was the center of activity of the northern tribes at the time of the Divided Kingdom. In the centuries following it was sieged and besieged and captured and recaptured by a parade of warring nations. Through it all it acquired a certain flavor of heathen idolatry. By New Testament times the people weren't really heathen, but they weren't really considered

Jews, either, not in the historical, scriptural, ceremonial sense. And a terrible animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans had rooted. (That was the point of Jesus' Good Samaritan story, of course: the hated Samaritan turned out to be the good neighbor.)

The Samaritans are ripe for Philip's ministry. Just prior to his coming many had turned to another man of "miracles," one who made his living doing magic tricks. His name is Simon, and he is not above hoisting his own flag. The people are exposed to his bragging so long that many finally take his word for it that he has great power from God.

But their affection for Philip is different. He comes "bringing the evangel," that is, proclaiming the good news of the resurrection and baptizing people in the name of the Lord Jesus. Finally, even Simon the magician believes, and is baptized, and is amazed at the miracles Philip is able to perform.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, there are still some disciples who have not fled the persecution. It must be stimulating for them to hear of Philip's work in Samaria and its great reception there. To show their support, and to get some first-hand insight into what is going on, they decide to send Peter and John to visit Philip.

Upon arriving, the two men find that Philip's work has been hugely effective. Apparently, however, there has not been a "little Pentecost" experience. That is, the people have not received the added gift of the Holy Spirit.

This, then, will be the contribution Peter and John will make to the ministry in Samaria.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Well situated as the Super Sorcerer of Samaria is Simon the magician — until along comes Philip, preaching, teaching, and performing miracles in the name of Jesus. It would be a rare sorcerer indeed who didn't feel upstaged.

However, even Simon finds himself caught up in Philip's good news of the resurrection. He too finally believes and is baptized.

Then, just about the time he is getting used to being second banana, two more of these Christ believers come from Jerusalem and do some further razzle-dazzle. The Super Sorcerer must feel a bit obscured.

Actually, it is the Holy Spirit that does the razzle-dazzle. Peter and John merely pray, and perform the laying on of hands. In some marvelous way, the Holy Spirit fills the believers and they begin speaking in tongues.

Simon is beside himself with curiosity. He still has a good deal of the sorcerer in him, even though he has converted to Philip's faith. He'd sure like to learn to do the "trick" that Peter and John have performed with their hands on people's heads. So, with his purse in his hand and his foot in his mouth, he approaches the two men.

"Hey, how much will you take to show me how you

do that?"

Peter is insulted. "How dare you try to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit! May you and your money both be damned! Stay away from our work, you phoney!"

Then Peter adds, "You'd better repent and ask the Lord to forgive you, for I see you are a prisoner of your own jealousies and sin."

Simon doesn't actually say he's sorry, but he does ask Peter and John to pray that he will not be punished. (Further church tradition has it that Simon continues in his wily ways. In so doing he contributes a word to our language. To this day the word "simony" means the buying and selling of sacred things.)

Peter and John preach and teach in Samaria with Philip for a little while, and then start back home. But they do not hurry back. There in that district of Samaria they are safe from the persecution raging in Jerusalem. So, in many villages along the way, they stop to preach the happy, startling news of the resurrection of their friend Jesus.

Philip doesn't rest on his baptisms either. He seems to be especially attuned to the heavenly will, so it does not seem strange or unnatural to him when a messenger from the Lord, an angel, comes to him. "Rise and travel south," the angel tells him. He is to go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip simply, obediently goes.

This is the road Ethiopians and others from the continent of Africa must take to get to and from Jerusalem. One day, as Philip is trucking on down it, he comes to a carriage in which a man sits reading aloud to himself.

The man is not really a little “funny.” Reading aloud is the way it was done in those days.

It turns out the carriage is returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Its occupant is probably what is known as a God-fearer, one who is interested in Judaism, but who is not a Jew.

It also turns out that the man is a eunuch from the royal court of Ethiopia. He is the Queen’s treasurer, in charge of all her wealth.

Again, Philip obeys a heavenly authority. “Go and join that carriage,” he is told by the Spirit. As he runs up to it, he recognizes that the man is reading from the prophet Isaiah. He is reading Isaiah 53:7-8, a passage believers interpret as pointing to the messiahship of Jesus Christ. Slicing through social niceties, Philip asks rather forthrightly, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“Not really,” replies the Queen’s treasurer. “How do you expect me to, unless someone explains it?” Whereupon he invites Philip to hop into the carriage for some theological conversation.

Beginning with that Isaiah passage, Philip tells the whole story of Jesus — his life, death, and resurrection. The Queen’s treasurer is so moved that when they come to some water — maybe a stream or a small pool — he asks earnestly, “What is to prevent my being baptized?” Obviously, nothing. Together, he and Philip enter the water and he is baptized.

Writer Luke closes this incident by implying that from there Philip just sort of disappears, and shows up again in Ashdod, where he continues preaching from town to town until he gets to Caesarea. There, later in this story,

we'll meet him again. Still preaching, he will have acquired a wife and four daughters.

— Acts 8: 15-40



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Meantime, back at the proverbial ranch, the outlaws are attacking and no cavalry is in sight. Saul's persecution of the believers reaches fanatic proportions in Jerusalem. He is literally dragging men and women out of their homes, throwing them into prison and threatening to kill them.

In spite of that (or maybe because of it) news of the resurrection shoots through the land like a lightning storm. The believers have given themselves the name "followers of the Way of the Lord." Already there are followers of the Way as far away as Damascus, at least 125 miles from Jerusalem. Saul, of course, decides he'd better bustle up to that city to "clean it up" too.

Saul is a Pharisee. He is a most ultra-conservative member of that most ultra-conservative Jewish party of the time. Pharisees are dedicated to rigidly strict adherence to the laws of Moses. The letter of the law has become supremely important at the expense of the intent of the law. Unlike the Sadducees, Pharisees do believe in the possibility of resurrection. But they cannot tolerate the fact that the resurrection of Jesus attracts people by the hundreds away from ancient patterns of Jewishness. For Saul, it becomes a matter of duty to God to smash down the

movement wherever it spurts up.

Always the correct and proper one, Saul carefully goes to the high priest in Jerusalem to obtain some letters of introduction to the synagogues of Damascus. The high priest in Jerusalem doesn't really have much jurisdiction over the synagogues of Damascus, but these letters are a sort of courtesy. They will give Saul a foot in the synagogue door in his effort to search Damascus for believers in Christ.

Saul takes quite an entourage with him as he starts out, probably men of the Temple Guard. After all, he could not arrest all the believers in Damascus and drag them back by himself to Jerusalem for trial. As it turns out, he needn't have worried. The Lord has other plans for Saul anyway.

Who could have guessed that the next time Saul is to see Jerusalem it will not be as a hero returning in triumph to the city? Who could have known — certainly not Saul himself — that he will return instead as a fervently devoted member of the believers he has tried so hard to crunch out?

Saul's conversion experience is a sudden, stunning, passionate drama. There are three different accounts of it sprinkled throughout the Book of Acts. The first appears in Chapter 9.

The travelers are nearing the end of the long journey to the city of Damascus. Suddenly Saul is surrounded, enveloped, by a flashing, energetic brilliance from the sky.

He is knocked to the ground by its impact. He finds himself flat out against the dust. Before he can sort out what has happened to him, he hears the words, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Maybe the words really do contain the scolding so often read into them by Sunday school teachers. But maybe instead they are sad words,

spoken with a yearning for Saul's soul.

Saul seems to sense who is speaking. "Who are you, Lord?" he asks. The question seems to be more than a request for the Lord to introduce himself. Saul may really be asking for a redefinition of his God. "Who are you, Lord?" he asks. ("Who are you, *really?*")

The answer is devastating. "I am Jesus, whom you persecute."

So Saul, who has prided himself on his Pharisaic correctness, has been persecuting the very God he has centered his life around. *And* in the name of that same God!

But the Lord doesn't tarry on the irony or the tragedy. The Lord simply tells Saul to get up and go on into Damascus. There he will be told what he must do. It is not unlike the time the disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem for their marching orders.

Meantime, the men with Saul are so shocked by what is happening that they stand statue-still for a moment or two. In this account of the event, they too hear the voice, but apparently Saul alone experiences the light.

Shaken to his roots emotionally, Saul picks himself up from the ground, ready to do what he is told without question. But when he opens his eyes, there is no sight. His eyes have been opened spiritually, but in the process, he is blinded physically.

Always before "in control" of his life, Saul is now totally dependent upon his men to get him to Damascus. More than that, now and for the rest of his life, he will be totally dependent upon, and totally submissive to, the Jesus he has so brutally reviled.



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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The bigger they are, the harder they fall — or so it would seem in the case of Saul. (Nice little poem there.)

Dignified, and self-important, Saul starts on down to Damascus to collect believers in Christ like notches on his belt. Suddenly he is bounced on his pompous tunic by a beam of light so brilliant that it leaves him totally blinded. Reverberating through that light is the voice of Jesus. It is a confrontation that is to turn Saul, the World's Best Persecutor, into Saul, the World's Most Contrite Believer.

Left shocked and helpless by this incident on the road, he is led by his men the rest of the way into the city. They put him up in the home of a friend, somebody named Judas (apparently a fairly common name in those days.)

Saul eats nothing, he drinks nothing. He spends his hours praying, adjusting to the terrible fact that he is blind, and trying to comprehend that the Jesus he has persecuted so vigorously is *his* Lord too. Both physically and spiritually, life has come to a complete dead-end standstill for Saul.

Then one day, the third day of Saul's blindness, a stranger comes to Judas' house. He walks right in, and lays his hands on Saul. He is immediately reassuring: he

calls Saul "brother." He says he was sent by Jesus himself, "whom you saw on the road as you were coming here."

He has two good reasons for coming: "Jesus sent me in order for you to see again — and so that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit." So this stranger, one Ananias, has come to minister to both of Saul's great needs, physical and spiritual.

If the other Ananias we met in Acts 5 could be characterized as a double-dealer, this Ananias in Acts 9 is superbly obedient to the resurrected Christ.

"Go to Straight Street," the Lord had said to Ananias in a vision. (Straight Street in Damascus is still in use today. Undoubtedly it was named by some unimaginative soul who noticed that it is not crooked.)

"Ask for Judas' houseguest from Tarsus," Ananias was instructed. (That would be Saul. He is a native of Tarsus, though he lives in Jerusalem.)

"He is praying and he already knows you are coming. He saw in a vision a man named Ananias place hands on him and restore his sight."

Ananias was a resident of Damascus, and a member of the group of believers there. As such he knows the terrible things Saul had done to the believers in Jerusalem. And he knows exactly why Saul had started out for Damascus. So asking Ananias to go to the aid of Saul is precisely like asking, say, a Joshua Rosenbaum to go to the aid of Hitler in 1944. It must have taken unbelievable, monumental courage for Ananias to obey.

It is true that he did offer some resistance to the whole idea. He reminded the Lord that this Saul has come to Damascus with the authority to arrest "all who call on your

name." But that didn't get him off the hook at all.

"You must go anyway," the Lord insisted, "for I have chosen this man. He will serve me by taking my name before nations and before kings, as well as to the people of Israel."

"We *are* talking about Saul, aren't we?" Ananias probably thought to himself.

The Lord then revealed to Ananias a very interesting fore-shadowing of Saul's future. "And I myself," said the Lord, "will show him all that he must suffer for my sake." (If the suffering that Saul is to go through was indeed pre-revealed to him, then it puts an added aura of sanctity to his willingness, from the time of his conversion to Christ, to endure and endure for his Lord.)

But before all that, there is the immediate problem of Saul's blindness. There in Judas' home, Ananias stretches out his hands and touches Saul, and at that moment something falls out of Saul's eyes. According to Luke — Dr. Luke — it looks like fish scales. Whatever it is, Saul's blindness is gone. He can see again.

Right then and there, he is baptized, undoubtedly by Ananias. He is able then to take some nourishment, and his strength begins to return.

Two critical and simultaneous crises are now over for Saul. He has been given renewed eyesight and a new insight. Ananias' two-fold mission is complete. Now Saul stands at the threshold of Christian history and casts a shadow so long that we walk in it yet.

— Acts 9: 8-19





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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Who, but believers in the risen Christ, could tuck a former terror like Saul under their wing and accept him as a changed man? Saul had started for Damascus to soufflé the believers there because they are part of a movement that is threatening traditional Jewish ways.

Now, suddenly, Saul is claiming to have seen the light — *the* light — and the believers believe him.

One wonders about the Judas with whom Saul stayed during his three-day blindness. Apparently he is not a believer, if the unconverted Saul planned ahead of time to be his houseguest. How does this Judas react to Saul's conversion? Now, *there* must be a "host" of questions!

Immediately upon regaining his sight through the ministering of Ananias, Saul sets about preaching in the synagogues of Damascus. (In the New Testament letter to the Galatians, we are told that Saul first goes to Arabia. That may well be, but this is Luke's story so we'll tell it his way.)

"Jesus is the son of God!" Saul asserts to the worshippers of Damascus, just as if he'd never doubted it. For this man — this up-to-now terrible, fearsome, dreadful man — to stand there and thunder out his new belief in Jesus surely

raises a lot of nervous questions among the believers. But it also has great impact upon them. Luke says that all who hear him are amazed.

The believers, however, are not the only ones to hear him. We must remind ourselves that in those days there were no such things as Christians and Jews. There were Jews who believed Jesus was the fulfillment of their faith, and Jews who did not. But they were all Jews and they all attended synagogue.

It is the non-believing Jews of the Damascus synagogues who can't cope with Saul. After all, it was only a few days ago that he was on their side. Now, he is contradicting everything they stand for.

They try to argue with Saul, but while he gets more and more articulate, they get more and more befuddled. Finally, they just can't stand it any longer. They make an organized decision to play "Let's Sneak Up On Saul And Assassinate Him."

The deed is carefully planned. Look-outs are posted by the city gates day and night. If Saul would just set foot outside the city wall, he could be pounced upon and killed without interference by the believers inside the city.

Somewhere among the assassins, however, there is either a spy or a blabbermouth. News of the plot gets back to Saul. By now, of course, Saul has many friends among the believers of Damascus. It is their turn to do some plotting. In the darkness of night, they bring Saul to a place where there is a hole in the city wall. There they have him crouch down inside a big basket. Then, slowly, carefully, they lower the basket over the outside of the wall to safety. Undoubtedly, Saul is in fear for his life during

this incident, which may make him the world's first chicken in a basket.

Taking leave of his basket and of Damascus, Saul heads for Jerusalem. Fear grips the community there anew. It was in Jerusalem that Saul had done such terrible damage to the believers. Who is going to believe he is "one of the gang" now?

Well, Barnabas does. Good, sweet, generous Barnabas. He is the one person in Jerusalem willing to take a chance on Saul.

He brings Saul to the disciples and tells them about the experience on the Damascus road, making very sure they understand that it was the Lord who spoke to Saul. "Why, Saul even got up in the Damascus synagogues and preached about the resurrection," he tells them. The disciples trust Barnabas, even if they don't trust Saul, so Saul is allowed to stay.

Irrepressible, Saul begins preaching all over Jerusalem, but soon he's in trouble once more. He riles the Greek-speaking segment of the population, though Luke doesn't tell us how. For whatever reason, it's death threat time again.

Possibly remembering Stephen's horrible death there in Jerusalem, the brothers in the faith hustle Saul right out of town. First they get him to the seaport town of Caesarea, and from there to his home town, the place of his birth, Tarsus.

With Saul the Persecutor now a believer, and Saul the Believer "on ice" for awhile and out of trouble, there comes a lovely time of peace for the whole church throughout all of Judea and Galilee and Samaria. The Holy Spirit hovers

over the fellowship, enabling it to grow in numbers and to live its life in utter reverence for the Lord.

— Acts 9: 19-31

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Luke would have made a good TV cameraman. He has a knack for “panning” his “camera” over all of the church’s earliest history, and then zooming in on key individuals to tell his story. First he focuses on Peter, then Stephen, Philip and Saul. And now, toward the end of Acts 9, Luke swings the camera back to Peter.

Peter has been batting around from city to city telling everyone who isn’t earmuffed about the resurrection. Luke’s camera catches him now at Lydda, northwest of Jerusalem. In Lydda, there is already a fairly sizeable group of believers.

Also in Lydda is a man named Aeneas, who has spent eight years in his bed, paralyzed. When he and Peter meet, Pete, in the most simple way, tells Aeneas, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you.” And that is that — Peter has simply stated an accomplished fact. Then he tells the astounded “curee,” “Get up and make your bed!”

What’s this? Ol’ Salt, Sea and Fish Nets quite possibly didn’t even make his own bed that morning. How come he is suddenly trying for the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval?

“Take up your bed and walk,” Jesus had said at the healing of another paralytic (John 5:11.) “Make your bed,”

Peter says now. In other words, "Symbolize to the world that you won't need that bed of pain ever again!"

Aeneas does more than that. All along the coastal plain he goes, telling people of his former affliction and showing them his new miraculous mobility. And they hear and see and believe. It's possible that he and Peter travel together for awhile, although Luke doesn't tell us that for sure.

We do know that while in Lydda Peter gets an emergency plea to go to near-by Joppa. (Joppa is known as Jaffa today, and is a port of entry to Jerusalem.)

There a dearly loved disciple has fallen ill and died. Her name is Tabitha (if you like Aramaic) or Dorcas (for you Greeks out there) or just plain Gazelle (if you prefer the deerly familiar.) Tabitha Dorcas Gazelle was a very special person to the community. She chose to spend her time doing good things for other people. Her death is a sad and difficult experience for her friends. It is a measure of their devotion to her that at her death they rush two men to bring Peter over from Lydda. He wastes no time in getting there.

By the time he arrives, however, her body has been ceremonially washed and laid out for viewing in an upstairs bedroom. One can just see Peter taking those stairs two or three at a time.

Upon entering the room he is immediately surrounded by a number of mourning widows. Life in those days is hard for women with no men to support them. Tabitha made it a little easier, by making clothes for her friends. Now her widow friends want Peter to know how special Tabitha was to each of them. In tears, each one shows

him a shirt or a coat Tabitha made just for her.

Peter shoos them all out of the room. Then he gets down on his knees beside the body of this friend, and he prays.

Suddenly, he looks at the body, and says, "Tabitha! Get up!"

Tabitha opens her eyes. She struggles to sit up. Peter reaches out and helps her to her feet.

With what is surely great, moving joy, Peter calls her grieving friends back into the room, and presents to them — Tabitha alive!

One can imagine the impact this occasion has on the community, as word of the miracle flashes around the city. It is an event that makes believers out of a lot of Joppans. Peter's eye-witness account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has a new reality for them.

For a long time after that, Peter stays on in Joppa. He stays with a leather tanner whose name is Simon. It's interesting that a good Jew like Peter would stay with a tanner, as tanning was considered a religiously "unclean" occupation by the Jews. However, Peter has never before been enamored of the social art of conforming. Why should he start now?

As we shall see, it is this very quality in Peter that the risen Christ will soon use to broaden the whole course of the whole church.

— Acts 9: 32-43





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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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What has in it an Italian, a Jew, and a blanket full of animals? A freighter from the old country? Nope. Chapter Ten of the Book of Acts. And it reads like a three-scene short story.

The first scene is set in Caesarea, in Judea. The spotlight is on one Cornelius, a Captain in the Italian Regiment of the Roman Army. Cornelius is not a Jew, but he is a religious man, who has brought up his whole family to worship God.

The time is about three o'clock in the afternoon. (If writer Luke gives a detail like that, how could anyone not believe it?) Cornelius is alone in his house. Suddenly, he envisions an angel in the room. He is later to describe the visitor's clothes as "shining."

The angel calls out: "Cornelius!" The good Captain from Italy stares in fright.

"Yes, sir? What-a you want?"

"Though you are not a Jew, you have given generously to the Jewish Community Fund. God has not forgotten your kindness, nor your prayers."

What a nice compliment from a messenger from God! Can't hardly get much higher than that! But the angel

has more than a compliment for Cornelius. He has a command.

"I want you to send somebody to Joppa to bring a man named Simon Peter back here to Caesarea. He is staying in the ocean-front home of another Simon, the one who is a tanner."

With that, the angel is gone, without even waiting for an answer.

Without hesitation, Cornelius chooses a soldier who is a religious man, and two household servants, and sends them off to Joppa to find this man Peter. Thus endeth Scene One.

Scene Two begins at noon the next day in Joppa, on the roof of Simon the tanner's seaside home. Simon's home apparently has the traditional flat roof of Palestine, with outside steps leading up to it. Peter has gone up to the roof. There he is praying. Suddenly, a great revelation comes to him: "I'm hungry!"

Then he maybe calls down over the roof: "Hey, is lunch about ready? I'm starved!"

"Sorry, Peter, not quite," someone likely answers. "It'll be a few minutes yet."

Peter returns to his praying. Suddenly, quite possibly with his eyes wide open (and maybe his mouth, too) he is confronted by a vision of his own. It is as if the heavens literally draw apart to let down a sheet by its four corners.

In the sheet is a menagerie — walking, crawling and winged animals. These are the particular animals regarded by ancient Jewish ceremonial laws as unclean. Their meat is not to be touched or eaten. Peter must have staggered back and landed on his back pocket, for a voice calls to

him through the vision: "Get up, Peter! Kill these animals, and eat them."

There is no question in Peter's mind who is addressing him, but he is aghast at the command. "No, no, Lord! You know I have never eaten anything that is considered unclean!"

But the voice chides him, "Peter, what God considers clean, you have no right to consider unclean."

Apparently, Peter can't quite believe what he hears, because the Lord has to repeat it twice more before the sheet is finally taken back into heaven.

While Peter is still wondering what that was all about, the messengers from Cornelius arrive at the tanner's home. They call out to inquire whether Peter is staying there. So deep in thought is Peter that it doesn't really sink in that the men are asking for him. By now, the Lord must be thinking Peter is a real winner.

"Peter!" prods the Lord. "That's you they're asking for! Now, don't you hesitate to go with them. I assure you it was I who sent them."

Peter then clambers down the stairs and greets his callers. "I'm the man you are looking for. What can I do for you?"

What Peter can do for them makes up the third "scene" of Acts Ten, and our next chapter.

We have seen that unquestioned obedience on the part of Cornelius caused him to call Peter to Caesarea. We'll now see that unquestioned obedience on the part of Peter will call non-Jews to the risen Christ. Up to now Gentiles were held pretty much at arm's length by Jews. But, "What God considers clean, you have no right to consider un-

clean," the voice of the vision told Peter. "Whom God considers worthy," Peter hears in that, "You have no right to consider unworthy."

— Acts 10: 1-21

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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“Is Simon Peter staying here?”

Cornelius’ men stand on the ground and call up to a sort of pre-occupied man on a roof. No, the man doesn’t have a loose tile. It was common in those days to use the flat roofs of Palestine for a little solitude. The man is Peter, who has just had a vision so startling that he still is sorting through its meaning.

The visitors have come to Joppa to find Simon Peter and bring him back to Caesarea, per order of Cornelius, per order of God.

Peter finally comes down from the roof. “I am Simon Peter,” he says to the visitors. “What do you want?”

“It’s really very simple, Simon,” they say in effect. “We were sent here by Cornelius of the Roman Regiment. He is a good man, a religious man, and well-thought of in the Jewish community. An angel told him to send for you. He is to listen to whatever it is you have to say.”

So we see that with exquisite timing, God has covered all the bases. In one vision God tells the Gentile Cornelius to go get Peter the Jew, who believes in the resurrection of Jesus, and to listen to what he has to say. In another vision, God tells Peter to disregard the ancient Jewish

disdain for Gentiles, and to go with these men to Cornelius. It is a beautifully wrapped package.

Peter invites the men in, and beds them down for the night. The next day he sets off for Caesarea, and some of his Joppa brothers in Christ go with him.

In Caesarea, quite a gathering waits in Cornelius' living room. Apparently Cornelius' gregarious Latin nature has moved him to invite friends and relatives in for Peter's arrival.

As Peter approaches the house, Cornelius bounds out like an eager puppy, to greet him and kneel at his feet. It is a case of trying too hard. Peter, embarrassed, reaches down and pulls Cornelius to his feet. "Get up, pal!" he says, "After all, I am only a man!"

Cornelius dusts himself off, and leads Peter towards his crowded living room. They talk together as they go, Cornelius quite possibly briefing Peter about the people who have assembled.

It is easy to imagine that an expectant hush falls as the two men enter the room. Peter, being Peter, rushes into the silence.

"Surely all of you must know," he says, "that a Jew, by his religion, is not allowed to associate with Gentiles like you. But God has shown me in a vision that I must no longer consider anyone to be 'unclean.' That's why I came without question when you sent for me. But now I would like to know, why *did* you send for me?"

So Cornelius recounts for Peter the story of the angel in the shining robes. "He told me to send for you. And we do appreciate your coming. We are anxious to hear what message God wants you to tell us."

Peter plows right in. "I know now, for the first time, that God doesn't play favorites. Whoever worships him and does what is right, God accepts. It doesn't matter what race or nationality he is."

Murmurs of surprise must buzz up. Peter goes on, "It was to the people of Israel that God sent the good news of peace through Jesus Christ... but Jesus Christ is the Lord of *all* people."

From a dyed-in-the-wool, psalm-reading, prophet-quoting Jew like Peter, that is a remarkable statement. But there's more.

"You must have heard about Jesus of Nazareth. God gave him the power of the Holy Spirit. He healed those under the power of the Devil. You must have heard how much good he did wherever he went, because the power of God was with him."

As Peter moves to the point, do we detect a little understandable boasting? "My friends and I are witnesses to everything Jesus did — and to his crucifixion — and to his resurrection! Three days after they killed him, God raised him from death! Not everyone saw him — but we did! We even ate and drank with him after he came back to life! He commanded us to tell everyone he is *alive*, and to say that God has appointed him judge of all persons, living and dead!"

Then, assuming these Gentiles know Jewish Scripture, Peter tells them, "You know our prophets spoke about him, saying that all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven..."

Suddenly, there is interruption! Someone has begun praising God in unfamiliar, ecstatic sounds, or tongues.

Then another person also, and another, until, as it was at Pentecost, all who are listening to Peter are filled with power.

Suddenly, it isn't Peter's show anymore. It is the Holy Spirit's.

— Acts 10: 21-44



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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There stands Peter the Jew, in the midst of the friends and relatives of Cornelius the Gentile. He is telling them about the resurrection of his friend Jesus.

Suddenly these Gentiles, these non-Jews, speak in tongues! The Jews who have come with Peter to Caesarea are simply stunned. Jews believe Jesus is the fulfillment of *their* faith. How can it be that non-Jews receive the gift of the Holy Spirit too?

But Peter himself is pretty impressed, and he is willing to go a step further. "If Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirit just as we did," he insists, "then surely no one can deny them the right to be baptized with water in the name of Jesus Christ." And he forthwith arranges for their baptism.

Thus, Peter is used by the Holy Spirit to answer a question that will soon become an urgent one: Can people who are not Jews embrace the Jewish Messiah? It's a question that is to take a lot more settling by the early church over the years, but for Peter, if it's good enough for the Holy Spirit, it's good enough for him.

However, not even the Holy Spirit can get away with going over the heads of the ecclesiastical fathers. By the time Peter finally leaves Caesarea and gets back to Jerusa-

lem, the Jews there who believe in Christ are fuming. Word has gotten around the whole province that pagans have been allowed to accept Christ.

Hitting at the level of established ancient law, Peter's Jerusalem critics attack. "How dare you go into the home of a Gentile and actually eat with him?"

Peter stays cool. He gives them a detail-by-detail account of what took place in Joppa and Caesarea. He tells them of God's clear lesson, "Do not consider unclean anything that God has declared clean!" He explains that as he was himself speaking to Cornelius and his Gentile friends, the Holy Spirit came upon them.

"I remembered then," Peter tells these critics, "that the Lord said, 'John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

And then he drops this on them: "If God gave those Gentiles the same gift of the Holy Spirit that he gave us when we first believed in the Lord Jesus Christ — what was I supposed to do — try to stop God?"

It is a convincing argument. The Jewish believers turn from criticism of Peter to praise to the Lord: "He has given the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!"

Peter's conversion of Cornelius and his Gentile friends is like the first sweet shoot of a many-branched tree. We'll see this "Gentile tree" grow strong and gain form as the Gentile movement sweeps yet another city, Syrian Antioch, and later many other cities of the Mediterranean. We'll watch it become broad and dominant and fruitful as Saul becomes the missionary Paul, an untiring "gardener," who spends his life tending it.

Interestingly, it was not through some thought-out

plan of the disciples that the seed of that tree was planted in Antioch. Rather it was by the grand, historical plan of God. As Luke shows us, when the persecution exploded into being at the time of Stephen's death, the believers spurted out of Jerusalem in all directions. Some went to Cyprus, others to Phoenicia, others to Antioch. It was natural for the scattered Jews to tell other Jews, wherever they found them, about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. (It was relatively safe to do so away from Jerusalem, away from the tradition-encased Temple and its ultra-conservative power structure.)

The Jews did not, however, always share their good news with the Gentiles of their new town. After all, Gentiles were traditionally considered outside the bounds of the Messiah's reach.

The Holy Spirit is the power behind the Gentile movement, and nowhere is it so apparent as in Antioch. There the refugees from Jerusalem are joined by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene. They are also moved to tell the resurrection news to the Gentiles.

"The Lord's power was with them," writes Luke. And so it is. In the twinkling of the providential eye, a whole city full of Gentiles become believers in the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, so effective is the ministry at Antioch that before very long, the center of activity for the early church is to shift from Jewish Jerusalem to Gentile Antioch.

— Acts 10: 44 – 11: 21



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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News of the Gentile congregation in Antioch reaches Jerusalem. It must cause an epidemic of wrinkled noses among the conservative Jerusalem Jews. "We told you," they surely sneer, "that that upstart religion would come to no good."

But there are also the Jews who see Jesus as the fulfillment of their Jewishness. For them, this news is confirmation that Peter's Caesarea experience with Cornelius and his Gentile friends is not to be unique. There is Antioch now, and there will be many other cities later.

So the Jerusalem believers, Jewish, decide to send an ambassador to the Antioch believers, Gentile. It is as if the mother hen congregation, upon discovering a chick she didn't know she had, yearns to tuck it under her wing.

There may even be in the decision the kind of overeagerness that translates into a sort of innocent arrogance. ("Let's send someone up to Antioch in case the Holy Spirit can't handle it.")

And without doubt there is in the decision pure, ardent, loyal devotion to their friend Jesus and to his resurrection. ("Let's send someone to share with the Gentiles everything Jesus taught us.")

Whatever their reasons, the Jerusalem believers could not have chosen a man more precisely right for the job — a Good Ol' Charlie Brown type, Barnabas.

If Charlie Brown has an impulse to goodness, so does Barnabas. (We remember that Barnabas sold a field and gave the money to the poor.) If Charlie Brown has a sweet, forgiving nature, so does Barnabas, as shall soon become apparent. And, as we shall also soon see, the goodness of Barnabas, like that of the beleaguered Charlie Brown, is not always appreciated.

Writer Luke obviously had great affection for Barnabas, describing him with the same words with which he earlier described Stephen: "full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

In addition to the sweet qualities of his nature, Barnabas is the obvious choice to go to Antioch for another reason. It's quite possible he knows the men, or at least some of them, who are preaching so effectively there. Some are from Cyprus and Cyrene, and Cyprus is Barnabas' birthplace and home.

It's even possible these men have been influenced by Barnabas' generosity of spirit, as demonstrated by his accepting the former terror Saul into the Jerusalem fellowship. In any case, now in Antioch, they certainly demonstrate similar qualities of openness and acceptance, as they go about preaching to Gentiles. Barnabas arrives, then, in Antioch, and can see that the grace of God has been flowing in and among the people there, touching and blessing them. He is moved with happiness for them. "With all your hearts," he urges them, "be true forever to our Lord Jesus Christ."

A marvelous thought occurs to Barnabas. The city of

Antioch is vibrating with new believers. What better situation to bring the energetic Saul back into the preaching picture? Saul has been cooling his heels in his hometown Tarsus. He had been hurried off to Tarsus by the believers of Jerusalem when his preaching there began to cause too much tension.

Possibly Barnabas thinks of Saul now because he feels the need for help in shepherding this unusual flock. But if that were the case, he surely would have gone through the proper ecclesiastic channels back at Jerusalem, and there's no indication he did that.

It seems likely instead that Good Ol' Barnabas perceives the opportunity to enable his friend Saul to safely phase back into an active, mainstream ministry. Here in Antioch Saul could hone his preaching skills, and he would himself receive nurturing from the fellowship of believers.

So, "Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul," Luke records in a matter-of-fact way. But that casual sentence is really one magnificent Jack-in-the-box. A world of history is about to pop out of it.

— Acts 11: 22-25





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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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The last time we saw Saul he was being hustled off to Tarsus because his life was in danger in Jerusalem. Perhaps at that time Barnabas made a promise to himself: someday, when the moment was right, he would help Saul return to the fellowship and be useful again.

Well, the time is right now. Here in Antioch is a fast-growing congregation removed from the persecution in Jerusalem, and ministering to Gentiles. It could use a man like Saul to strengthen its ministry and to be strengthened by it.

So Barnabas sprints on down to Tarsus, Saul's old stomping ground, and talks him into coming back to Antioch with him.

Saul will one day be the dominant figure in the fellowship of believers, but for now it is Barnabas who is the leader (in Antioch, at least) and Saul who is his assistant.

For a whole year the two of them are Antioch's dynamic duo, and a throng of believers gathers regularly to be taught by them.

Luke inserts here one of those fascinating little footnotes to history that he tends to sprinkle throughout the story. It is in Antioch that the believers acquire a new

name: "It is here that the disciples are first called Christians."

Some say the name was given to the believers derisively; some say it was simply a natural way of speaking, just as those who followed Herod were called Herodians.

In any case, the city of Antioch has now given the fellowship of believers:

- a new perspective about Gentiles
- a new name, "Christians"
- and a new chance for Saul.

It seems appropriate that as believer activity dwindles in Jerusalem because of the persecution, it begins a long period of "centering down" in Antioch. We see a shift of focus, from Jerusalem as the historical center of faith for Jewish believers in Christ, to Antioch as the center of activity for Christians of all backgrounds.

Antioch was considered to be the third great city of the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. It was the capital of Syria and it is said to have been magnificent. Balladeers of our time would have had a field day there. Frank Sinatra could have dropped "Three Coins in the Fountain" at almost any street corner in the city. Johnny Mercer could find his Old Lamplighter there too. Antioch was probably the only city of antiquity to light its streets at night. But Burt Bacharach, if he'd lived there, might never have had occasion to write "Raindrops Are Falling on My Head," for the wide roadways of Antioch were lined with covered colonnades, making it possible to walk the entire length of the city without ruining one's hairdo in a rain storm.

Located as it was on the Orontes river, Antioch was

a kind of hub city. Those going east by land took off from Antioch. Egyptians and Palestinians used Antioch as a vacation resort.

Perhaps it was this metropolitan atmosphere that attracted a number of prophets to come to Antioch from Jerusalem. More likely, they had heard of the exciting work going on in Antioch and wanted to be a part of it. These prophets seem different from the thundering guardians of social conscience who roar through the Old Testament. For one thing, flashes of insight into the future are now among their most significant gifts. Here in the Book of Acts, Chapter 12, we meet one such prophet — Agabus. Agabus comes to a prayer meeting one day and, inspired by the Spirit, stands up and announces, “A great, world-wide famine is on its way!”

(Luke is careful to record that there was indeed a famine during the reign of Claudius, probably around 46 A.D. It wasn’t world-wide, but it did affect Palestine.)

So trusted by Antioch Christians is this new breed of prophet that no one who hears Agabus doubts him for a minute. In what must be an emotionally moving discussion, the believers think first of their friends off in Jerusalem. They know Jerusalem could not long support its people in a famine without buying food from surrounding areas.

So, “Let’s pass the hat!” someone calls out, and a collection is taken for famine relief. In this purely unselfish gesture so characteristic of the early church, each person gives as much as he or she can.

Who do the believers choose to deliver the money to Jerusalem? Barnabas, who had come to them on behalf

of the Jerusalem church, and Saul, who had fled Jerusalem in danger of his life. Ambassador and fugitive would return to Jerusalem together.

— Acts 11: 25-30

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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With what must be light hearts and heavy pockets, Barnabas and Saul set out from Antioch to Jerusalem. (And that sure beats heavy hearts and light pockets!) They are to deliver the money collected for famine relief to the Jerusalem church.

The Jerusalem receivers of this gift must be a little nonplused. Unless someone like Agabus has told them, they know nothing of the coming dry spell. It would be a little like having your neighbor come over and bandage your head in the belief that you were about to bash it. However, the “bandage” is undoubtedly accepted with graciousness by the elders of the Jerusalem church.

Doubletake: By *whom*? The *elders*? Whatever happened to the seven “deacons” who were appointed to handle such funds? Those who survived the persecution have probably fled Jerusalem. In fact, most of the earliest disciples have left. So the direction of the church is now under a group called “elders.” How many, we don’t know, but Luke tells us later that Jesus’ brother James is regarded as their leader.

Whatever its organizational form, it seems the early Jerusalem church is not to be without suffering. Just about

the time Saul and Barnabas arrive, another persecution flashes out. This time, instead of non-believing Jews against believing Jews, it is Romans against Christians. (The Romans, though, lap up conservative Jewish approval.) The persecution is not really a full-blown hurricane yet; it seems directed at the Christian leaders only.

Tragically, it begins with the execution of James the brother of John. This James is not to be confused with the brother of Jesus. This is one of the sons of Zebedee, one of the sons of thunder, as the name translates. He is ordered killed by King Herod.

Why did Herod pounce on James? We don't know. But James, so far as we can tell, is the first of Jesus' twelve hand-picked original disciples to die.

There is some irony in that. Or better, the coming true of a prophesy by Jesus. There was a time when the brothers James and John angered the other disciples because they expressed an interest in having a special place of honor in Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus' answer to the brothers was, "You haven't any idea what you are asking for. Can you drink from the cup I have to drink from and be baptized the way I have to be?" (In short, can you take a life of self-sacrifice and a death of suffering?)

"Sure we can," the sons of Zebedee responded.

The Lord then said, "You will indeed drink that cup and experience that baptism."

So now, almost a dozen years later, James has followed the path of his Lord. Herod does not order him crucified, however. Instead, he orders him beheaded with a sword.

This Herod was the half-nephew of the Herod who was such a bear that Jesus had called him "that fox." Like uncle,

like nephew.

When Herod sees that some non-believing Jews are pleased with James' death, he is sly enough to figure two heads are better than one, rolling. So he decides to get Peter's, too.

Herod plans Peter's arrest with great foresight in his malice. He arranges the arrest in Jerusalem at a peak time for getting Jewish attention: during the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Incidentally, here is where usually meticulous writer Luke makes a minor goof: He says Herod arrested Peter during the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and planned to bring him before the people after Passover. Actually, Passover came before the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The two festivals follow immediately one upon the other, and Luke apparently has a tendency to think of them as one. (He does the same thing in Luke 22:1.) It's not unlike saying, "Last Easter I gave up sugar for Lent." Two different observances, lumped into one.

At any rate, Peter is arrested and put under a very heavy and well-planned guard. Sixteen soldiers — four groups of four each — are assigned to him.

Through all this we can imagine how wounded and stunned the Christian community once more must feel. In a brutal and unjust moment it has lost another of its own, James. Yet another, Peter, is awaiting execution with no human hope of surviving.

Staggered, the fellowship of believers comes together in homes to gather courage — and hope — through prayer. Luke tells us, "Peter was kept in jail, but the people of the church were praying to God for him."





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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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"Shall I pray for you?" a pious lady asked her neighbor as she started off to church.

"Sure," came the reply. "A little divine intervention never hurt anybody!"

Peter couldn't have said it better. A little divine intervention has gotten him out of one holy scrape after another. This time, jailed by Herod and under heavy guard, there is no other possibility for his rescue. The very next day he is to be brought before the people for "trial." James, the brother of John, has just been beheaded, and the people want more blood splashed. There is no question but that Peter will lose his head, too.

But, a little divine intervention never hurt anybody.

Luke tells the story with sparkling detail in Acts 12. There is both genuine reverence and a kind of dry humor in his narrative. He tells it in two scenes.

In the first, Peter is lying in jail bound up in two chains. There is a guard on either side of him. A lesser man would have needed a glass of warm milk and a lullaby from his mother to sleep under such circumstances. But not Peter. He sleeps, and the guards sleep too.

Suddenly, light fills the cell and an angel of the Lord

stands over Peter. But Peter is either exhausted or a very heavy sleeper. He doesn't stir. The angel needs to get him up and out of there, and is not inclined to be gentle. He pokes Peter in the side.

"Get up! Hurry!"

"Fnnpf?" (An unrecorded but likely response.)

But if Peter is not at his best, the angel is: he has caused Peter's chains to fall off. Peter probably sits there rubbing his ankles and wrists where the chains had been, trying to comprehend what is happening. The angel gets a little impatient:

"Tie your belt!"

Peter obeys.

"Put your shoes on!"

Peter does as he is told.

"Now, put on your coat and follow me!"

"Sounds good to me!" Peter must have thought, so he follows the angel right past all the guard stations to the iron gate that leads into the city. It swings open by itself, undoubtedly zapped by the angel.

Peter and his rescuer enter the city and walk down one block. Then, as suddenly as he had come to Peter, the angel leaves him. All this time, Luke tells us, Peter thought he was dreaming. Now, fully awakened, and standing alone in the dead of night on the streets of Jerusalem, he clearly understands what has taken place.

"It's *true*!" he says aloud. "I know it now! The Lord sent an angel to snatch me away from Herod — and from what the Jews intended to do to me!" (He had undoubtedly known in jail that Jewish approval of James' beheading would spur Herod to try for two.)

As the truth of his freedom washes over him, Peter heads for the home of Mary, a relative to Barnabas, and the mother of a young man named John Mark, whom we have yet to meet.

Though it is well past the hour of decent retirement, Peter knows all his friends are there, still praying for him with all their hearts. It must be very comforting, very touching to know this.

Peter hurries through the dark, quiet streets to Mary's home. Like many of that time, her house has a portico entrance. It probably resembles a covered patio. That night it must look like pure heaven to a fleeing Peter.

For us, it is the stage on which scene two of this rescue drama is played out.

— Acts 12: 6-12

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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As fast as his legs can pump, Peter has run to Mary's house to tell his friends that he is safe: he has actually been led out of jail in the quiet of night by an angel of the Lord.

He reaches Mary's home and knocks on the outside door of the portico. A servant girl named Rhoda hears his knock and comes to answer it. Before she can get the door open, she recognizes Peter's voice. She probably looks at that moment "like a figure-head for a ship to be called *The Astonishment*," to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens.

Luke then tells, with a kind of affectionate amusement, how Rhoda manages to distinguish herself through all the rest of history — as a monumental scatterbrain. Here is Peter, the very person they've been praying for all night long, miraculously delivered to their doorstep, and Rhoda gets so excited she runs back to tell the others — *and forgets to let him in!*

Then, to make matters worse, nobody will believe her. So while the object of their prayers pounds on the door, the fellowship of believers is inside, reassuring Rhoda not to worry: he's not really there, she's just crazy. But Rhoda keeps insisting. They finally understand she really believes

Peter is out there, but they still don't believe it themselves. One begins to wonder if Rhoda were the only dingbat in the crowd.

Finally, "It is his angel," the believers decide. (The concept of guardian angels, as distinguished from messenger angels, is in part based on this remark of Peter's friends.)

Meanwhile, Peter keeps on knocking and rapping and pounding, undoubtedly getting thoroughly exasperated. *Finally*, it occurs to someone to open the door.

This almost comic scenario changes now to one of poignancy. Peter's friends, thrilled and moved, crowd around the door. There are sounds of amazement, and spewed out questions and general hubbub.

But time is short, for Peter is still in danger. He gestures for them to quiet down. In his direct and uncomplicated manner he tells them that it is the Lord who has literally walked him out of jail, and saved him from death.

He seems anxious to have the church officials know of his survival.

"Be sure to tell James and the rest of the brothers," he urges them. (Jesus' brother James, remember, was now head of the Jerusalem church.)

Then, Luke tells us, "Peter left and went somewhere else." This is one of Luke's vaguer sentences, perhaps deliberately so. Maybe Luke simply didn't know where Peter went, but it's possible he thought it better not to reveal who helped Peter through that frightening night.

Morning comes, the day after Peter's rescue/escape. The soldiers in charge of the jail are aghast. How could it have happened?

That's what Herod wants to know, too. And getting

no reasonable answer (after all, there is no *reasonable* answer) he does what any good tyrant would have done: he has the guards executed.

Then Herod faunches on down to Caesarea, perhaps to ponder and sulk a lot about what has happened.

— Acts 12: 13-19





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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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We are nearing now the end of what could be called “Part I” of the Book of Acts. Part I has been a panorama, a full sweep, of the earliest activities of the earliest church. “Part II” will focus almost solely on the activities of one special man — Saul, who will become known as Paul the apostle. (Apostle: one who is sent, a missionary.)

But first, writer Luke neatly ties up three loose ends:

1) With a relish that tells us what he thinks of Herod, Luke tells us Herod died a horrible death. He was, to be exact, “eaten by worms.” The story goes that Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon for some unrecorded reason. The people figure they’d better get back on his good side in a hurry: their food supply came from him.

Somehow, they manage to win over the man who is in charge of the palace. He has a name like a mild profanity: Blastus.

Through Blastus the people plead with Herod for peace. Herod agrees to a conference: the king will honor these lowly creatures with his exalted presence at an appointed time. Herod really makes a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer spectacular out of it. He puts on his full royal regalia for the meeting, and sits on his royal throne. From that pinnacle

he makes a speech to the gathered crowd. The people know that in order to get the bread they need, they will have to butter him up.

"That's not a man speaking," they gush. "It's a god!" Whereupon the flattered Herod collapses. (What a flare for the dramatic!) He subsequently dies of worms. Luke's belief is that Herod died because he accepted glory that belonged to God alone.

2) Luke's second loose end is much lovelier to behold: The Word of God, he tells us simply, continues to spread and to grow.

3) And, finally, Luke says that Barnabas and Saul finish their task in Jerusalem (the delivery of the famine relief funds), and return to Antioch. They bring with them a young relative of Barnabas, known as John Mark.

Throughout this first part of his Book of Acts, Luke has used the rhythm of the poet. The pulse beat of the church's joy and trouble, joy and trouble, is almost the beat of an iambic pentameter. And "Whazzat?" someone may ask. It's a line of verse with five upswing, downswing beats. These lines from Gray's "Elegy" are an example:

♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪  
*Full many a flower is born to blush unseen*  
 ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪   ♪  
*And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

Luke's "iambic pentameter" makes a sort of outline of the early church's story:

♪ Acts 2:1 - 47 — Marvelously joyful days made thrilling by the Pentecost experience, and by deep and touching fellowship.

' Acts 3:1 - 4:22 — Trouble begins with Peter's arrest

for healing in the name of the risen Lord.

○ Acts 4:23 - 5:16 — The young church matures as the fellowship prays together, shares together, and works miracles.

‘ Acts 5:17 - 42 — A second, more serious wave of trouble is characterized by the arrest, trial and conviction of Peter and some of the others. A death sentence is passed but revoked.

○ Acts 6:1 - 7 — The church gets organized to serve the poor better, and the number of believers grows larger and larger.

‘ Acts 6:8 - 8:3 — A third wave of trouble is severe. Stephen is killed and Saul sets about to destroy the church.

○ Acts 8:4 - 9:19 — The young church, scattered by persecution like seeds in the wind, takes root wherever the seeds are blown. Saul, the great persecutor, is dramatically converted by the risen Lord.

‘ Acts 9:20 - 30 — Saul begins his ministry, but it is amid persecution in both Damascus and Jerusalem.

○ Acts 9:31 - 11:30 — Luke records a peaceful interlude. Gentile movements spring up in Caesarea and Antioch, and Saul is brought back into full service.

‘ Acts 12:1 - 19 — The Roman government begins persecuting Christians. Peter is nearly executed, but is rescued by an angel.

Upswing, downswing, upswing, downswing. But Luke does not end on a down beat. Mixing in a little music jargon, we might say Luke adds a “coda” to the story, a little “tail” or concluding passage. We’ve already seen it among the loose ends he so meticulously tied up. (And what looser end is there than a tail?)

The coda is beautifully upbeat: “The Word of God continued to spread and to grow.”

— *Acts 12: 20-25 and Acts 2: 1-47 – 12: 25*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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A camel is a horse that a committee put together. That's not exactly original, and it's not exactly Webster, but as definitions go, it's also not bad. If it holds true, there must be a lot of camels gallumphing along out there somewhere, because the church has always done its work by way of committees.

Probably our earliest record of a New Testament committee is the group chosen to care for the widows of Jerusalem in Acts 6. Now, at the very beginning of Acts 14, we sit in on another committee, the steering committee of the church at Antioch.

Apparently the more formal organization of the Jerusalem church has been considerably altered here in Antioch. There are no noticeably elected deacons or elders. Instead, we meet a committee of five: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul. They are all considered to be prophets and teachers. We have already seen that a lot of spiritually gifted persons known as prophets had converged on Antioch. The gifts of the "teachers" were apparently very similar to those of the prophets, though it's likely the teachers tend to do more, well, teaching.

It surprises us a little that Barnabas and Saul are on

that list of five. Though we have seen the insightfulness of Barnabas, and the intensity of Saul, neither quality up to now has visibly translated itself as an actual prophetic gift in the special sense. Luke, however, obviously knows something he hasn't previously told us, so he lists them as prophets and teachers.

As for the others on the list, Laconic Luke has done it again. He often brings people into the story without giving us much background on them. He obviously expects the audience he wrote for (Theophilus) to know who Simeon, Lucius and Manaen are. But for the rest of us, it's a game of "Clue." One piece of information is given about each person, and we are left to draw our own conclusions. For instance, Simeon is nicknamed "The Black." Our conclusion: it's probable he is African.

Then there is Lucius. Our clue: he is from Cyrene, on the northern tip of Africa. That's it. That's all we know about Lucius.

And finally there is Manaen. Our clue: he had been brought up with Governor Herod. Perhaps he and Herod had been childhood playmates. Or perhaps, as some scholars think, Manaen was a foster brother to Herod.

Whoever they may be, all five men apparently feel their roles very deeply. They serve the Lord, they fast, and they stay sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. One day they know the Spirit is saying to them, "Barnabas and Saul are to be singled out, so they can do the special work I have cut out for them." More prayer and more fasting. Finally, the believers ceremoniously place their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and tell them to go wherever they feel the Lord is calling them. The laying on of hands is an act of blessing,

and an act to symbolize the participation of the others in the ministry the two men are about to undertake. Through this simple act, the committee has just created one remarkable camel.

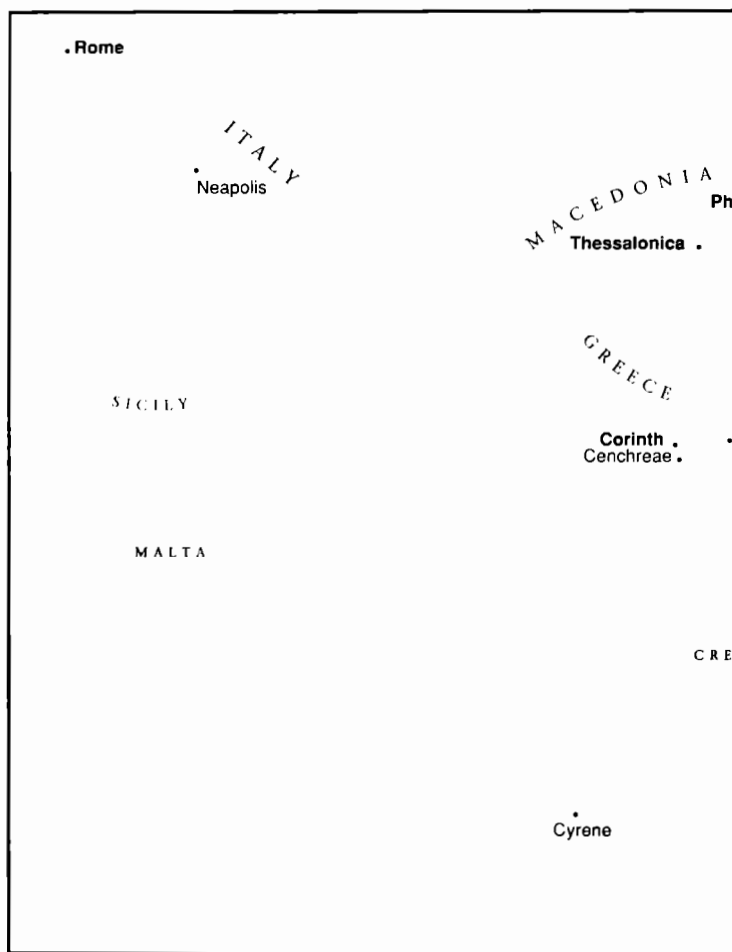
If you are a map person, (or even if you're not!) check out the map on the next page. Find Jerusalem, where it all started, and Antioch where the action is at this point in the story.

Then locate Samaria and Gaza where Philip taught; Damascus where Saul was headed at the time of his conversion; Lydda and Joppa where Peter healed Aeneas and brought Tabitha back to life, Caesarea where Cornelius lived, and other places we've "visited."

Now that you know where we've been, watch where we're going. Barnabas and Saul are about to set off on the first of three missionary journeys that Saul will take. It might be to useful trace their route with a pencil as they travel from place to place.

When we are through playing "connect-the-dots" we won't, of course, have drawn the usual kiddie picture. But we just might see the shape of the divine hand at work in history.

— Acts 13: 1-3



# LANDS OF





# THE APOSTLES



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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Say you are an early-church teenager, brought up in Jerusalem. A little while back your uncle (or perhaps it's your cousin) and his best friend came to Jerusalem to bring a gift of money from Antioch to the Jerusalem church. When it is time for the visitors to return to Antioch, you get to go with them.

After a little while in Antioch, uncle and friend prepare to travel around the Mediterranean, commissioned by the Holy Spirit to tell of Jesus' resurrection. Wouldn't you day-dream, hope and even beg to go with them?

Perhaps that's how John Mark got to go with his uncle (or maybe cousin) Barnabas and his friend Saul. On the other hand, what do we know? Maybe John Mark didn't really want to go on that journey at all. Maybe Uncle Barnabas, when he brought John Mark from Jerusalem, promised the boy's mother he'd take good care of J.M., and for that reason was reluctant to leave him alone in Antioch. (John Mark's mother was the Mary to whose house Peter ran, after his rescue from jail that night.)

Whatever John Mark's reason for starting out on this journey, it obviously deteriorates rapidly, as we shall soon see. However, the journey appears to begin pleasantly

enough as J.M., Barnabas, and Saul sail for the island of Cyprus. Cyprus is a natural starting point for the journey. Barnabas is surely well known here, having been born and raised on Cyprus. In addition, this stop may be a sort of courtesy call: the Antioch church, which encouraged Barnabas and Saul to take this trip, was begun by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene.

The ship pulls into Salamis first, where Barnabas and Saul get to do some preaching in the Jewish synagogues. Eventually, they preach their way across the island, to the city of Paphos.

Paphos was the capital of Cyprus. It was also where the seat of the Roman governor or proconsul was. (The rest of him was there, too.) His name was Sergius Paulus. Luke regards him as an intelligent fellow who had the good judgment to invite Barnabas and Saul to talk with him personally of this Jesus he is hearing about.

The governor, however, has an attendant who will give Barnabas and Saul their first taste of the kind of jealousy they will often experience in their travels. His name is Bar Jesus. (Jesus was a common name in those days, and Bar Jesus means the son of Jesus.) He is also known as Elymas, which some think means "Magician." Whether it does or not, he is. However, magic-ing in those days was not just show biz. A magician was a sort of guru.

Much like the Simon that Philip and Peter dealt with in Samaria (Acts 8) this magician feels that Barnabas and Saul are a threat to his position among the people and with the governor. He therefore does his best to discredit them before the governor, and to turn him away from the faith.

Saul becomes furious — “filled with the intensity of the Holy Spirit” is the way Luke puts it - and he reads Bar Jesus Elymas a sizzling riot act: “You son of the devil, enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy —” Obviously, Saul doesn’t like the guy very much.

“You always try to turn the truth of the Lord into lies!” he snorts. “God’ll get you for that — and right now. You are so blind to the truth that God will now make you blind to light for awhile.”

Saul isn’t kidding. Immediately it feels to Elymas that there is a misty blackness over his eyes. The last we hear of him, he is groping around, trying to find someone to lead him by the hand. How long did he stay blind? We don’t know. Maybe only three days, as Saul himself did at his conversion.

All this apparently has a profound effect upon the governor. He forthwith becomes a believer. As for Elymas, since he is temporarily out of vision, it seems to be a case of out of sight, out of the governor’s mind.

Right in the middle of this governor and magician story, writer Luke tosses in a surprise: “Then Saul — also known as Paul — was filled with the Holy Spirit.” Paul! Unlike Old Testament heroes whose names get changed through some dramatic experience (Abram into Abraham, Jacob into Israel) Saul becomes Paul as a matter of convenience. “Saul” is Hebrew. During the most Jewish period of his life, “Saul” was quite appropriate. Now that he is a believer, he is called by his Greek name, “Paul.”

Paul and his companions leave Paphos and the enlightened governor and his de-lighted magician, and sail to Perga in Pamphylia.

Notice: Luke has now listed Paul's name first. Paul now becomes the central figure of the early church, and remains so throughout the rest of the Book of Acts.

— Acts 13: 4 – 13: 13

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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It's goodbye Cyprus, hello Perga, as the travelers continue their journey. If you're following the route on the map, and even if you're not, Perga is located in the province of Pamphylia, northwest of Cyprus, across the Mediterranean Sea.

We know nothing about this stop at Perga, except for the disappointing fact that for John Mark, it is his last stop. Here he abandons ship and goes on home. Why? Does he need a clean shirt? Does he miss his mother? Is he prone to be seasick? (Better prone than standing up.)

Given the fact of his youthfulness, it is likely John Mark is just plain homesick: he does not return to Antioch, but goes all the way back to Jerusalem, where his mother lives and his friends are.

(For the record, the kid wasn't all bad. He grew up, in fact, to write the book we now call the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written.)

As we shall see later, J.M.'s "desertion" will one day become the focus of a devastating argument between Paul and Barnabas. Maybe writer Luke purposely does not tell why John Mark split, so that Theophilus, to whom Luke is writing, will not be tempted to take sides in the sad and

ugly quarrel that is to come.

Be that as it may, Paul and the rest of his traveling troupe (it is to be assumed there were others besides him and Barnabas) leave Perga to struggle up the Taurus mountains to reach another town named Antioch, this one on the border of Pisidia.

Like the good Jews that they are, Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue on their very first Sabbath in town. And the synagogue officials, like the gracious hosts that they are, invite them to speak. "Thought you'd never ask!" Paul probably responds, as he heads on up to the podium. There are probably buzzes of speculation about who he is, for Luke records that before he speaks, Paul motions with his hand, undoubtedly for silence.

Now "Hold That Tiger" may not seem like a very romantic song to most of us, but to a couple of tigers, well... In the same sense, Paul's speech here at Antioch of Pisidia sometimes seem pretty pedantic to the first time reader of today, but to the "tigers" of that moment, it was passionate, inspired and wonderful.

In his very opening sentence, Paul is careful to do three things: identify himself as a Jew, address the Jews in the congregation, and address the God-fearers in the congregation (those non-Jews who believe in God): "Fellow Israelites and all Gentiles here who worship God — listen to me!"

The speech is reminiscent of those we have heard from Stephen and Peter: Jesus is Saviour and that is the fulfillment of Israel's history. Paul recounts for his audience highlights of that history, from Israel's stay in Egypt through the kingship of David.

Then, like a man unwrapping a present for his friends,



he reveals, "It was Jesus, a descendant of King David, that God made the Savior of Israel —just as he had promised!"

For hopeful Jews who have never heard this before, it must be almost unbelievable news. Paul supports it with the story of Jesus' cousin John, who went around urging people to turn from their sins and be baptized, and who, near the end of his life, said, "I am not who you are waiting for, but he is indeed coming!"

"My friends," Paul continues, "this message of salvation has been sent to us. Us! The people in Jerusalem did not know Jesus is our Savior. They didn't even know what the prophets were talking about. By condemning Jesus to death, they accidentally made the words of the prophets come true."

Paul now sings out the theme words of virtually all the speeches in the book of Acts: "But God raised Jesus from the dead!"

There are witnesses to this fantastic miracle, Paul insists, and he and his friends have come here to tell people about it. He dwells on the promise of no more bodily death or decay, and makes a remarkable statement for one who had once so rigidly adhered to the ancient Jewish laws: "Everyone who believes in Jesus is set free from all the sins that the law of Moses could not free you from."

He closes with an admonition from the Old Testament, " — wonder and die, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." (That's a little intense on Paul's part. The quotation really reads, " — wonder and be astounded —" (Habakkuk 1:5.)

Something in Paul's speech — perhaps the fact that it touches on their own deepest hopes — moves the people

very much. Many come up to Paul and Barnabas and ask them to come back next Sabbath. Paul and Barnabas encourage each of them to continue living their lives as touched by the grace of God.

— Acts 13: 4-43

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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"More! Tell us more!"

Paul's speech to the congregation in Pisidian Antioch must have been a dazzler. Those who heard him are thrilled and excited and reluctant to let him go. The following Sabbath nearly everyone in town is in the synagogue.

Naturally, those in ecclesiastical power feel squished all out of alignment. They have never been able to draw a crowd like this. Now these strangers make them look like pikers.

There is a reasonable and sensitive way for them to handle this, of course: outshout the dirty dogs! So, right in the middle of worship, some of them begin to heckle Paul. They contradict him, insult him, and generally try to make him look like a dweeb.

Paul and Barnabas, however, are underwhelmed. No childish shouting in the synagogue is going to stop them from telling about the resurrection and the eternal life it offers.

"Okay for you guys," they say in effect to their detractors. "If you're going to throw away the message we rightfully offer to you first, then we'll take our message to the Gentiles."

To give legitimacy to this idea, they quote Isaiah 49:6: "I will give you as a light to the nations, so that my salvation will reach the whole earth."

The Gentiles of this Antioch in Pisidia are delighted. They now have their chance at eternal life.

But something else has happened here too. Paul and Barnabas have now set the pattern that is to become standard operating procedure for them. In town after town they will: (1) go first to the Jewish synagogue with their message, (2) get rejected or even ejected by the synagogue power structure, (3) turn to the non-Jews of the community with their great exhilarating news.

We're not sure how long Paul and Barnabas stay in Pisidian Antioch, but it is long enough for their message from God to spread all over the region - which phenomenon, of course, does nothing to endear them to the Jews in power. It is clear Paul and Barnabas have got to be gotten rid of. The question is, how to accomplish the deed?

Well, it's easy, if you know the community and its politics. The Jewish leaders simply conspire with two groups who are also apparently threatened by this resurrection movement: the city fathers, and some high society matrons, Gentile women of high standing. Mr. Powers and Mrs. Richwitch are apparently glad to cooperate. Together they stir up a persecution squall that scuds Paul and Barnabas right out of the region.

We don't know exactly what did happen, but it is obviously no big deal as far as Paul and Barnabas are concerned. They merely shake the dust of the city from their feet (an old custom sort of equivalent to thumbing your nose) and go on down to Iconium. But behind them,

in Antioch of Pisidia, they leave more than just a handful of jealous Jewish leaders and high society elegants. Joy, the pure joy of the Holy Spirit, fills those Jews who believe and the converted Gentiles of that city.

As for Paul and Barnabas, after shaking the dust off their feet, they put those feet to good use. It is a ninety mile hike to their next stop, Iconium. Here, Luke tells us, the same thing happens all over again as happened at Pisidian Antioch.

Round 1: Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue in Iconium, where they preach so effectively that great masses of Jews — and non-Jews — become believers.

Round 2: Those Jews who would not, or could not, believe become edgy. Hostile is a better word. So they team up with Gentiles and start a poison tongue campaign against Paul and Barnabas.

Round 3: But Paul and Barnabas preach for their Lord without fear. All the beautiful things they say about the Lord's gift of grace are demonstrated by their ability to perform miracles.

Round 4: Iconium becomes Schizopolis, split right down the middle over Paul and Barnabas. Some side with the two missionaries, others with the non-believing Jews. But the non-believing Jews and their allies eventually enter into a marriage of convenience, so to speak, with the city authorities. Together they beget a plan to attack Paul and Barnabas with stones.

Round 5: Paul and Barnabas may be brave, but they are not stupid. When they get wind that they are about to become targets for the slings and arrows of outrageous non-believers, they do the intelligent thing: they bolt out

of town and head for Lycaonia.

Last round (or is it?): Having reached the region of Lycaonia, our two friends appear to be safe, at least for the moment.

— Acts 13: 42 – 14: 6

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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The city of Lystra in Lycaonia must seem both weird and wonderful to Paul and Barnabas. The other cities they've preached in were strongly Jewish. The synagogue officials in those cities had a way of wanting it to stay that way. When the Jews in their flocks would begin to listen to Paul and Barnabas, things could get pretty nasty.

Here in Lystra, however, there are no Jewish applecarts for Paul and Barnabas to upset. At least not at first. In fact, there is not even a Jewish synagogue they can get tossed out of.

There is instead a temple for the worship of Zeus, the chiefest honcho of them all in Greek mythology. There are other gods here, too. Among them is Hermes, perhaps more familiarly known as Mercury, the messenger of the gods.

Paul and Barnabas must be delighted for this chance to preach in a field that is, as far as the faith is concerned, totally unplowed. Sure enough, we find them in the middle of the city one day, preaching to a crowd of townspeople. One of those listening is a man who has been crippled from birth. Something in the expression on this man's face catches Paul's attention. He can tell: the man believes.

Paul knows right then that he can heal him. Across the crowd, Paul looks at the man.

"Up! On your feet!" he calls.

Leap! The man is on his feet — on his feet and walking! The crowd gasps. Nothing in their god-worship has prepared them for this. But, loyal souls, they give their gods the credit anyway — and give Paul and Barnabas the credit for being their gods.

"The gods have come down to us!" they scream. "Barnabas is Zeus! Paul is Mercury!"

So overwhelmed are the people of Lystra that they revert to their native tongue, Lycaonian (probably from Greek.) Paul and Barnabas apparently do not know enough of the Lycaonian language to understand that they have just been neatly promoted to deity.

The rumor that they are gods swiftly reaches the Temple of Zeus, just outside the city. There, even the priest of Zeus is thrilled. Probably feeling very important, he selects some handsome bulls, puts garlands of flowers around their necks, and hustles them off to the city gate. He, and the crowd, intend to offer these bulls as a sacrifice to Barnabas Zeus and Mercury Paul.

Finally it dawns on Barnabas and Paul who it is that is being so honored. They are aghast. Into the middle of the crowd they fling themselves, tearing at their own clothes as they go, to symbolize that they disassociate themselves from the whole idea.

"Why are you doing this thing?" they shout. "We are no different from you! We're just as human as you are! We've come all the way here to tell you some good news! Now, listen to us! This great news will turn you away from



all these meaningless things. It will show you the living God!"

If this were a Jewish crowd, Paul and Barnabas would have narrated the whole of Jewish history to prove Christ is the savior they've been expecting. That would have been useless here. It would not have communicated to a people with a totally different history.

Instead, they remind the crowd of familiar things to make a different point: "Ours is the god who lives! It is he who made the heaven, the earth, the sea and everything in them. Even in the past, he always gave proof of himself. Who do you think gives you rain and crops and food — and even happiness?"

Well, it worked, but just barely. The bulls were not sacrificed. One gets the feeling, however, that only Paul and Barnabas, and maybe the bulls, were very happy about it.

Would Paul and Barnabas in a later moment of privacy see the humor in being called Zeus, the king of gods, and Mercury, the messenger? Would Barnabas kid Paul because Barnabas got the higher rating? (Some believe this shows that Barnabas was standing there looking serene and strong that day, while Paul, like a good messenger, was doing all the talking.) And wouldn't the priest of Zeus, having fallen for all that bull, feel a little silly shooing his decorated oxen back to the temple?

We have seen that the crowds of Lystra are obviously very excitable. As Paul and Barnabas are about to discover, they are also very fickle.

— Acts 14: 7 – 14: 18



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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While Paul and Barnabas are convincing the folks at Lystra that they have not just wafted in from Mt. Olympus, trouble is afoot for them elsewhere.

“Afoot” is the word for it. All the way from Iconium and Pisidian Antioch travel some remarkably unhappy Jews. These are the synagogue officials (and perhaps some of their loyalists) who feel their authority has been diminished because Paul and Barnabas preached in their synagogues and made Christians of “their” Jews.

The resentment of these authorities has apparently become obsessive: they have come eighteen miles in the case of those from Iconium, and ninety miles further in the case of those from Pisidian Antioch.

Apparently those from Antioch, even after inciting the city fathers and some high society mamas into persecuting Paul and Barnabas right out of their city, still aren’t satisfied. It’s likely only the deaths of Paul and Barnabas will satisfy them.

However, before you pluck a turkey you have to catch it, and Paul and Barnabas, when they hurtled out of Antioch of Pisidia, did not take time to leave a forwarding address. By the time the authorities pick up their trail in Iconium,

Paul and Barnabas have fortunately moved on to Lystra. Apparently they are unaware of their pursuers.

Their pursuers, however, make good use of their time in Iconium. They seek out the Iconium synagogue officials, who are probably easily identifiable by the raised hackles, courtesy of Paul and Barnabas. Here the alliance begins between the religious authorities of the two cities, Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. Combining forces, they're off to Lystra to find Paul and Barnabas, and to grind them into the dust.

Sure enough, the hunters find the huntees in Lystra, surrounded by crowds to whom Paul is probably preaching. It is a perfect set-up for the Jewish authorities. They manipulate the Lystran crowd like a marionette, and very effectively turn the people against Paul and Barnabas. It probably doesn't take a lot of effort to do that. One doesn't get the feeling the Lystrans were very discerning. This is the same bunch that went into hysterics thinking Paul and Barnabas were Greek gods padding around on earth.

Heckling in the crowd turns into hubbub, and hubbub turns into rioting. Paul and Barnabas undoubtedly make an effort to calm everybody down, but someone starts throwing rocks. We can almost see Paul and Barnabas dodging, trying to protect their heads with their hands and arms, but the barrage comes on just too fast. Suddenly, Paul is hit hard and goes down.

Voices from the crowd probably ring out with the sound of victory in them:

"Got him! We got him!"

"I'll say we got him! He's dead!"

"Come on — let's get the remains of this bum out of

our city!"

Convinced they are removing a dead man, they drag Paul's body through the streets and out of town. Barnabas, meanwhile, must have gotten shoved aside in the melee and is probably more than a little battered himself.

The mob, its violence spent, leaves Paul's body huddled on the ground and goes back inside the city gates, possibly to hold forth at the local pubs.

But there are those in Lystra who have been touched by Paul's preaching and who believe his good news. They come now to attend this man who has become their friend.

"Look! He's breathing!" someone maybe says. "He's still alive!"

Gathering close around, they minister to him, and, surely, pray for him. What deep relief they must feel when Paul begins to regain consciousness!

When he is clear enough to walk, probably supported by his friends, Paul actually goes back into the town that did this to him. He surely keeps a low profile that night, undoubtedly resting at the home of friends. At some point he is rejoined by Barnabas.

The next day, lest the Jews find Paul is alive and decide to incite a replay of the riot, Paul and Barnabas slip quietly out of town and head southeast for Derbe.

— 14: 19-20



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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"Home is where you hang your hat." Paul and Barnabas, for awhile at least, hang their hats in Derbe, which, of course, makes them Derbe hats.

Life goes very well for the two apostles in Derbe. The people of the city are eager listeners, and many become believers. And, for once, there is no trouble from anybody.

It is interesting that in spite of all the hostility the two men experienced in the various cities of this journey, it never seemed to cross their minds to go home. But here in this pleasant and serene town, they make plans to return to Antioch of Syria. It was the church at Antioch that had blessed them on their way for this trip. Perhaps they felt a need to touch home base, or maybe they felt it was time to report on their work among the Gentiles.

As we might expect, they would not be taking the easy road home. It would have been a cinch from Derbe to simply follow the yellow brick road, or even just their noses, to Paul's home town Tarsus. From there it would be easy to get to Syrian Antioch.

But Paul is a deeply committed man, and so is Barnabas. They have planted a lot of seedlings along the way, and they want to go back to tend each one.

Back to Lystra where Paul was savagely wounded?

Back to Iconium where there had been a plot to stone them both?

Back to Pisidian Antioch where Jews and Gentiles together had thrown them out?

Oh, yes! For it is not their persecutors they think about. It is the great numbers of new disciples in each town — men and women who had been thirsty for the good news, and who had been so receptive to it.

Fortunately, this time round, in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia, the visits are apparently uneventful. Possibly this time Paul and Barnabas do not preach in public, but only nurture those who have already become believers. Luke tells us the travelers give new heart to the believers in each of the cities, and beg them to stay true to the faith.

Possibly in reference to their own difficulties on this trip, they tell the believers that “through many troubles do we enter the Kingdom of God.”

Since in every case the previous departure of the two apostles had been less than leisurely, they had not attended to the business of appointing elders. They do so now, assuring that each of these seedling churches will take root.

Finally, in each town they re-visit, Paul and Barnabas hold what is surely a loving service of prayer and fasting to commit the new believers to the Lord.

Writer Luke faithfully notes that this time around Paul preaches in Perga. He had not done so their first stop here, though Luke does not tell us why. Maybe Paul had had his hands full with John Mark and whatever his problem was, as it was from here that John Mark had “deserted”



the party.

From Perga the company travels the short distance to the port of Attalia, where they board a ship for home.

At last, Paul and Barnabas set foot again in Antioch of Syria, from where, as Luke puts it, "they had been commended to God's grace for the work they had now completed."

There must be a lot of happy bear-hugging as the people of the Antioch church gather excitedly to greet their two returned friends, and to share in their adventures.

Uppermost in the minds of Paul and Barnabas as they tell their story is their work among the Gentiles. In detail they tell "all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles." Thus they carefully assure the brothers and sisters that this is God's work, not Paul's, not Barnabas'.

It must seem good to be home, for the two men settle down for a long stay in Antioch.

— Acts 14: 21-28



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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In his “Pictures at an Exhibition” composer Mussorgsky imaginatively stands us before ten paintings and musically describes each one.

Mussorgsky has an idea good enough to borrow. Let’s take a tour through a make-believe art museum of ancient Antioch.

Our first imaginary painting is entitled “Paul and Barnabas Are Followed by Trouble as if It Were a Bloodhound and They Had on Sweaty Socks.” The title may be better than the painting.

Scenes of Antioch stretch across the background of this make-believe painting. Paul is standing to the left, one hand on his hip, the other flailing the air. Notice how red his ears are. Notice how his lips curl down. Notice how his index finger almost touches the nose of the man to the right. Notice how that man looks as if he just might make “Stubby” an appropriate nickname for Paul. However, the man’s mouth is open not to bite that finger, but to outshout its owner.

The man is not alone. Standing beside him are a group of his friends, presenting a variety of scowls. Paul is not alone either. Barnabas stands beside him, sputtering —

and sputtering is not a usual activity for Barnabas.

Who are these men with whom Paul and Barnabas are having this afternoon social? They are believers in Christ, all right, but they are conservative types who are not happy that Paul and Barnabas are bringing in the Gentile sheaves. They have come all the way from Judea to contradict the teachings of the two apostles. Their point is that the Jewish Messiah should be for Jews alone.

Paul, once the most correct Hebrew of them all, says, in effect, "No way! Jesus emerges from Jewish history, but God's grace is for all nations!"

Thus, this screaming argument. Notice, however, the man in the corner of the painting. He holds up his hands in a "Hold it, you guys!" gesture. "Tell you what," this peacemaker says, "Let's send a delegation to Jerusalem to talk this thing over with the mother church."

It appears to be a graceful way for both sides to save face. Obviously, Paul and Barnabas are selected as part of the delegation, along with some others from Antioch. Whether those others include those "others" is not clear, but surely it would not have been fair to send a one-sided delegation to discuss such a hot issue. In any case, the group is blessed on its way by the Antioch church.

Do we hear promenade music? Time to move on to the next imaginary painting. This one is entitled, "Along the Way to Jerusalem." In it, Paul and Barnabas are speaking to an obviously much more receptive audience. Each person in the gathering looks with eagerness at the two missionaries. Everyone appears to be filled with joy.

The setting of this painting could be either Samaria or Phoenicia. Writer Luke records that in both places, Paul

and Barnabas tell of their work among Gentiles. And, in both places, the believers receive the news with great happiness. (Perhaps this is partly because of the work Philip did earlier among the Samaritans.)

Promenade time again. We move on to our last painting, which is entitled, "What Ever Happened to Circumcision?"

Paul and Barnabas are shown surrounded by the apostles and elders and others at the Temple in Jerusalem. It looks as if the whole church has turned out to welcome them and hear what they have to say about their work among the Gentiles. We are not sure, however if the rest of the delegation from Antioch is in the scene.

See that group of men to the right, pointing and glowering? They are Pharisees. Paul was a Pharisee, you'll remember, until he fell off his horse. Pharisees are sticklers for Jewish law. Even though these men are now believers, they are still strongly Jewish. They still think believers ought to signify their Jewishness the way Jews have signified their Jewishness since the days of Abraham.

"What ever happened to circumcision?" they say, in effect. "These Gentiles must be circumcised. And they must be told to obey the Law of Moses!"

It is, of course the issue that has brought Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, and now it is once more before the mother church.

Before we move on out of our imaginary gallery, we note that the elders and apostles decide that the issue deserves a fuller hearing. They will hold a special meeting to consider the question from all sides.



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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Almost every surviving shaper of the early church's history is in Jerusalem to discuss the "Gentile question."

For a moment, if you are old enough, remember again the funeral procession of John F. Kennedy. King and queen, prince and prime minister, chancellor and emperor strode shoulder to shoulder through the streets of Washington D.C. to St. Matthew's church. Almost every significant head of state in the world was gathered within the space of a few feet on that walk.

Even apart from the monumental sadness of the occasion, it was a moving moment. There was a sense of seeing the whole sweep of current history march before one's eyes.

The very same sense surely pervades the Jerusalem Conference around 45 A.D. The leaders have gathered. Paul is there, and Peter, and Barnabas and James, and perhaps Luke. They have come together with other delegates to discuss once again (and finally to settle, officially at least) the persistent question, Should believers in Christ have to become Jews before they can be considered Christians?

There has been much pro-ing and con-ing here. Finally, Peter stands. We can see him now with perhaps one hand

in the air, fingers spread wide with impatience. If fingers could talk, this quintet would be singing "I've Heard This Song Before." Clearly, in Peter's mind, the Gentile question has already been settled.

"You know perfectly well," he hammers to the Council, "that God made this decision a long time ago. God used me to bring the good news to the Gentiles." Peter's experience with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10) is by now general knowledge.

"God can read men's hearts," he insists. "God showed us his approval of Gentiles by sending them the Holy Spirit, just exactly as it was with us. There is no difference. None! God forgives their sins just because they believe. So why would you want to lay on the Gentiles a load — the law of Moses — that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?"

His conclusion is simple and touching: "We believe we are saved by the grace of our Lord. The Gentiles shall be saved exactly the same way!"

In the quietness that follows, Barnabas and Paul rise to tell of their work among the Gentiles.

When they finish, James speaks. He has a suggestion: "It would be a shame to complicate matters further for Gentiles. Why don't we just write them a letter with some simple guidelines? After all, they've had access to the law of Moses for a very long time, and can hear it read any Sabbath anywhere."

James' position as current head of the Jerusalem church just may give the suggestion the taste of authority. At any rate, the conference swallows it whole.

Two men we have not met before, Silas and Judas



(probably not the Judas that hosted the blinded Saul in Damascus), along with Barnabas and Paul, are chosen to deliver a tender letter to the church waiting at Antioch. The congregation there gathers as the little delegation arrives. The letter is read:

“We have heard that some believers from our area have upset you by their teachings. We did not send them. Because we are concerned, we are sending you some messengers from our fellowship. They are Judas and Silas. They will travel with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, who have risked death to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. Judas and Silas will tell you in person the same things we are writing in this letter. Through the Holy Spirit, we have decided not to burden you with any other requirement than these simple rules:

- eat no food that has been offered to idols;
- don’t eat blood, nor any animal that has been strangled;
- and don’t do anything immoral.

There will be no problem if you will do these things. Farewell.”

The letter is a fine piece of diplomatic art. The principles in it are already required in the Book of Leviticus for Gentile converts to Judaism. Thus the law-oriented Pharisees are satisfied. But the letter does not require of Gentiles that they must become Jews. Thus the grace-oriented believers are satisfied. Two birds, one stone.

The letter brings much joy to the Antioch Christians. So does the presence of Judas and Silas in their midst. The two men are highly regarded in the Jerusalem church. That they were chosen to deliver this letter may be a mark of

Jerusalem's affection for Antioch.

Judas eventually returns to Jerusalem. Silas chooses to stay in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. He does not know it, but before long he will witness a sad, shocking, unfathomable occurrence — the breakup of the friendship between Barnabas and Paul.

— *Acts*15: 6-35

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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Marie Antoinette, her head all neatly back in place, appears on a Steve Allen talk show with Ulysses S. Grant, Sir Thomas More, and Dr. Karl Marx. Conversation, argument, humor and flattery flash back and forth. A seance? No, just Mr. Allen's imaginative television series, "Meeting of the Minds." Were you too young, or too busy, a few years ago to enjoy these programs? Never mind. We'll do one for you now, with our old friends Barnabas and John Mark, our new friend Silas—and Timothy, whom we have yet to meet:

STEVE addresses Barnabas: Tell me — tell the world — what *happened* between you and Paul? Such good friends, such a terrible quarrel!

BARNABAS: Well, you have to remember, Paul was an extraordinarily intense man. And on the issue that split us apart, I guess I wasn't exactly Mr. Cool, either.

STEVE: Just what was that issue?

JOHN MARK: Steve, it was over me. As you may know, I started out with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey —

STEVE: Started, but not finished, right?

JOHN MARK: That's right. Early on, I chickened out. I was very young, remember, and the glamour of the voyage soon wore off for me.

STEVE: I see. Well, what does this have to do with the quarrel between Barnabas and Paul?

BARNABAS: Let me explain that one. Paul and I had been back in Antioch for some time, when —

STEVE: Back in Antioch?

BARNABAS: Yes, back from the Jerusalem Council. Anyway, Paul got the itch to go back to the places we had visited on our first journey —

STEVE: And you objected?

BARNABAS: No, I didn't object at all. It sounded great to me. But I did want to take John Mark along again. After all, he was more mature now, and I thought he deserved the chance to prove himself.

STEVE: But Paul said no?

JOHN MARK: Boy, did he say no!

BARNABAS: I had no idea Paul felt so strongly about Mark's "desertion." After all, he himself had been forgiven much by the believers, so I felt he should be able to forgive Mark. With Paul, though, it may not have been a matter of forgiveness. He felt so driven by the work! He may have felt the work was too important to take along someone who couldn't be counted on.

STEVE: So you quarreled.

BARNABAS: We fought! We snapped and bellowed and raged—and battered each other with words! And when the whirlwind was over, so was our friendship.

STEVE: How immeasurably sad!

BARNABAS: Truly it was — is! Even now I sometimes feel the same heavy, burdened, “yearning for things to be right again” feeling that gripped me for so long afterward. I never saw Paul again.

STEVE: How could that be?

JOHN MARK: You see, Steve, Barnabas didn’t stay around Antioch very long after that. He went to Cyprus, our home (we’re kin, you know.) And true to his faith in me, he took me along to be his assistant.

STEVE: How long did you stay there, Barn?

BARNABAS: I spent the rest of my life in Cyprus —

JOHN MARK: —preaching, encouraging, and loving people into the Kingdom.

STEVE: And Paul never re-visited Cyprus?

BARNABAS: Never. He returned to the other places we had visited on that first journey, but never to Cyprus.

STEVE: Then there was never a reconciliation. That’s tragic.

BARNABAS: Yes, it was sad — for both of us, I’m sure. However, it makes me feel good to know that some time later, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul alludes to me in a friendly way. And in his letter to Philemon and to the Colossians, he mentions Mark.

STEVE: Well, yes, that must be somehow comforting. And on that bittersweet note, we’ll pause for a chapter break.

— Acts 15: 36-39



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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We continue with our “Meeting of the Minds” talk show. Steve Allen takes up where he left off.

STEVE: We were saying, Barnabas, that you and John Mark went off to Cyprus after your quarrel with Paul. Tell us, what did Paul do then?

SILAS: I guess I’m the one to answer that. Paul was determined to take a second journey, so he chose me to go with him. The Antioch church gave us its blessing, and we set off.

STEVE: How did you feel about being singled out by Paul, one of the all-time Christian biggies, to take the place of Barnabas, no small image himself.

SILAS: I felt flattered, of course. And eager. I knew Paul pretty well by that time, you know. Judas and I traveled up to Antioch with him and Barnabas to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem Council.

STEVE: Yes, I remember. Some versions of the Bible say you stayed there in Antioch until Paul chose you for that second journey. Others say that after doing some work among the Antioch believers you returned to

Jerusalem. Maybe you can clear up that minor mystery for us.

SILAS: Well, I obviously couldn't be in both places at once, could I? Unless, of course I were some sort of split personality.

STEVE: (Chortles a Steve Allen chortle) Yes, well, I guess that's one mystery we're not going to clear up tonight, folks. No matter. Tell me about the journey you embarked on.

SILAS: First we went to Syria and Cilicia to give the churches there a morale boost. Then back to Derbe and then on to Lystra.

STEVE: You mean to tell me that Paul went back to Lystra, of all places? I thought he got clobbered there the first time around.

SILAS: He did. But he had already returned there, uneventfully, on his swing back from that first journey.

TIMOTHY: However, this stop at Lystra was not totally uneventful, at least not for me.

SILAS: That's right. This is one time when rolling stone Paul picked up a little moss.

STEVE: What?

TIMOTHY: I think I'm the little moss he's referring to.

STEVE: I see. You must be from the north side. Seriously, this is the point at which you joined Paul's party?

TIMOTHY: That's right.

SILAS: The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke very highly of this young man — enough so that Paul was impressed, and decided he'd be an asset to us



on our journey.

JOHN MARK: In a sense, he took my place —

BARNABAS: — just as Silas had taken mine.

STEVE: Tim, I understand Paul had you circumcised before taking you on board. Why? After all that talk at the Jerusalem Council about Gentile believers not having to be circumcised, and after the Council sent the letter to Antioch saying the same thing — after all that, wasn't it awfully inconsistent?

TIMOTHY: Not really. The Council did not prohibit circumcision. It only made clear it was not required. You see, my mother was a Jew, and a believer in Christ. But my father was a Gentile Greek. Paul knew we would be dealing with many law-oriented Jews. They would be highly unreceptive to the news of Christ if I went to them uncircumcised, like a Gentile. It just seemed better to Paul to do away with all the obstacles we could.

STEVE: I see. And were those law-oriented Jews receptive?

TIMOTHY: They certainly were.

SILAS: We spent a lot of time telling the churches about the decision made by the Jerusalem Council —

TIMOTHY: How satisfying it was to see them grow stronger in their faith!

SILAS: Also, everyday, more and more people came to believe, and that was a tremendously beautiful experience.

STEVE: Well, this looks like a good place to close our "Meeting of the Minds" program. I wish we had more time, folks.

SILAS: I just want to say one thing, Steve. Shortly after Timothy joined us, the journey really turned into, well, an adventure.

TIMOTHY: I'd never experienced anything like it. Exciting is the word!

SILAS: Tempestuous is the word!

STEVE: I'd like to hear about it, but "out of time" is the word! Goodnight, folks.

— Acts 15: 40 – 16: 5

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## CHAPTER FORTY

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Every once in a while, usually careful Luke says something that leaves scholars mumbling in confusion.

We have seen that Paul goes on a second missionary journey and takes Silas with him. Along the way at Lystra, they are joined by Timothy to replace John Mark. No problem there.

But Luke then records that after Lystra, the party goes on to Phrygia and Galatia. Big problem here. No one is quite sure to which ancient Phrygia, or to which ancient Galatia, Luke is referring.

Luke also tells us Paul and his friends want to preach in Asia. Again just where that "Asia" is is subject to interpretation. Maybe it doesn't matter much anyway: the Holy Spirit says "No." As to why, Luke doesn't bother to record.

It is clear, however, that Luke believes Paul was directed by the Holy Spirit as he journeyed from place to place. In addition to "Asia," Paul was also prevented from going into Bithynia. This time Luke uses the phrase "prevented by the Spirit of Jesus." (This is the only place in the whole Bible where this crystal-sharp term "Spirit of Jesus" is used.)

With so much territory scratched off his itinerary by

the Holy Travel Agent, Paul decides to try for Troas. Troas is a port looking across the Aegean Sea at the province of Macedonia. This time the Holy Spirit says a clear "Yes!"

If Luke has been occasionally hazy in his record of Paul's travels since Lystra, he suddenly now becomes very vivid. Possibly up to now he is just giving us a quickie synopsis of the trip so he can get on to what he considers the good stuff — the point at which Luke himself apparently joins Paul's entourage.

He tells us that one night in Troas — maybe even the first night — Paul has a dream, a vision. He sees a man from Macedonia standing before him. The man pleads with Paul: "Come on over to Macedonia. We need your help!" And then, says, Luke, (and who could blame him if he sounds a bit proud), "Right away we got ready to cross over to Macedonia." From that wee word, it is generally agreed that the "dear and glorious physician" joined Paul at Troas, possibly because Paul needed medical attention. That's a guess, but not an unlikely one. However it happened, Luke certainly becomes deeply involved with the mission. "We felt sure," he writes, "that God wanted us to preach the good news in Macedonia."

So they set sail for Macedonia immediately. Even the sea winds seem in tune with their sense of urgency. They make it to Macedonia in two days, even with a stop at the island of Samothrace. Later, on Paul's third journey, it will take five days to make the same voyage.

The party lands at the seaport of Neapolis. Finding nothing Neapolitan, not even ice cream, worth tarrying for, they hasten on to Philippi, nine miles distant. Just as "Los Angeles" is short for "Nuestra Señora La Reina de

Los Angeles," so Philippi is short for "Colonia Iulia Augustus Philippensis." That's not exactly Irish. Nor even Greek, even set down as it is in Alexander the Greek territory. Roman victories over the years had turned Philippi into a Little Bit of Italy. Sort of a mini-Rome, it was deliberately made so by its Roman military government.

As we have seen, Paul typically went to places where he might have the greatest influence. Though not the capital of Macedonia, Philippi was an important city, according to Luke. The Egnatian Way, the famous old Roman road, passed through Philippi, intersecting with the Gangites River.

There where river and road come together, come together also, for Sabbath prayer, the Jewish population of Philippi. It is probably all women. If there are any Jewish men in Philippi, they are in number fewer than ten. Their Jewish law requires the building of a synagogue if there are ten Jewish men in a community, and Philippi has no synagogue.

Once again, Paul goes first to the Jews with his good news message. Thus we find him and his companions on a Sabbath morning, talking quietly and informally beside the river to a group of Jewish women. It may seem a small and inauspicious beginning, but it is an acorn of a gathering. From it will sprout the solid oak of a church at Philippi.

— Acts 16: 6-13



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## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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Paul's first convert in Philippi (and thus in Europe) is a woman. Lydia is an intelligent, wealthy, generous businesswoman. She has settled in Philippi as a sales rep for a purple dye company. She is indeed a colorful lady.

The company she represents is based in Thyratira, a community noted for its production of the dye. Not too many college kids today major in Purple Dye, but in Lydia's day it was a lucrative business to get into. (The dye was expensive because it had to be squeezed a drop or two each from certain small shellfish.)

Maybe in those days there should have been a saying, "You can take Lydia out of Thyratira, but you can't take Thyratira out of Lydia." No, that's not a cutesy way of saying, "You can take the girl out of the country, but —" It's a cutesy way of saying that the community of Thyratira was located in a district whose name was also Lydia. That gives rise to the speculation that "Lydia" may have been the lady's nickname, real name unknown. If she'd come from Dallas, for instance, they might have dubbed her "Texas." (If Lydia were indeed nicknamed for her district, it's a good thing she didn't come from Sidon. It's located in the district of Syro-Phoenicia.)

Lydia is not a Jew. She is one of those God-fearing Gentiles whose open, inquiring minds enables them to participate with ease in Jewish worship. Thus we find her on a Sabbath morning with a small group of Jewish women who have gathered by the river for prayer.

Along come Paul and Luke, and probably Silas and Timothy. It is not just a Sabbath stroll that brings them here. True to their established pattern, they seek to take the good news to the Jews of Philippi first. They apparently have a pretty good idea where to find the gathering: by the river, they can bank on it.

After the proper amenities, Paul and friends accept the invitation to sit and worship with these women. Then, receiving the respectful attention due to male guests (at that time!), they share the story of the risen Christ, so dear to their hearts.

Lydia listens. She finds herself deeply moved. She asks for baptism, and Paul is glad to oblige. She and her whole household become members of the household of this Jesus of Nazareth.

After the baptism, Lydia yearns to be a part of the exciting work of these newcomers to Philippi.

"If you really think I am a true believer," she pleads, "please come and stay in my house."

Lydia has caught a view of the living God through these wandering preachers, and now she offers her home for their headquarters. Lydia is one of the most influential persons in Philippi. Extending this invitation can bring her no material return, no prestige in the business community, no new accounts. Though Luke doesn't tell us so, it is undoubtedly risky on all counts. However, the



only reassurance Lydia asks of Paul is that he confirm that she is a true believer. So earnest is she that Paul is persuaded to accept her hospitality. It is not unreasonable to assume that she has a house large enough to accommodate all of his party.

Paul's stay in Philippi is not to be without "sturm und drang," as we shall see in our next chapter. Still, it is obvious that Paul develops a strong and loving relationship with many Philippians. Much later, when Paul is imprisoned, probably in Rome, for his belief in the resurrection, he writes a letter to the church at Philippi, thanking his friends there for various offerings they have sent to him on his journeys. That letter is the book in our New Testament that we call "Philippians."

If you want to taste the tenor of the early church, if you want a glimpse of the personality of Paul, read this touching book. It is four short chapters about joy in adversity, and gratitude, and full love, and victory in Christ.

— Acts 16: 14-15



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## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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For all of Paul's many and strong virtues, he has at least one very obvious fault. He has one heck of a quick temper. The last time we saw it flare, he lost his best friend Barnabas. Now that temper is about to land Paul in jail.

Up to now, Lydia's home has provided a pleasant headquarters in Philippi for Paul and Silas, Timothy and Luke. They seem to feel at ease in the city, and have even developed a routine of preaching at community prayer services. Lately, though, they have had a problem. A young girl frequently follows them, screaming at the top of her voice.

"These men are servants of God," she screeches. "They tell you how to be saved." Now, obviously, her words are true. The problem is, they are spoken by an evil spirit within her. Paul is more than annoyed; he is sizzling angry.

There are many times in the New Testament when the spirit of evil seems compelled to shout out its recognition of the spirit of the divine. (The story of the Garasene demoniac, Luke 8:28, is an example.) Why this is true, we don't know. Why it angers Paul, we don't know. But a good guess that satisfies both questions might be this:

perhaps the “demon” wishes to cause the same fright in others that it experiences itself in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever the case, this girl’s insistent yelling goes on day after day. Finally, Paul can’t stand it one minute longer. Spinning around to face her, he snarls at the demon, “I order you in the name of Christ, come out of her.” Instantly, just like that, the girl is healed.

Now there is rejoicing for her healing, right? Wrong! There are frustration and anger instead. It turns out this girl is “owned” by a couple of opportunists. It seems she has had an ability to foretell the future. Her owners have been selling her prophecies and keeping the money for themselves. When the demon leaves her, so does the prophecy, and so do the profits, see?

Her owners are furious. They grab Paul and Silas and literally drag them to the authorities in the market place. From there the two are sent to top magistrates.

The charge against them is a switch from what they usually get. It is still your basic “How dare you shake the foundations of our establishment” charge, but this time the establishment is not Jewish, it is Roman. the charge is not, “They are preaching resurrection,” but it is instead, “They are preaching customs which are not legal for Romans to practice.” In short, instead of being accused of being Christians in Jewish territory, they are accused of being Jews in Roman territory. The charge is, of course, a ruse. But after all, how are you going to get a man condemned for healing someone?

A gathering crowd composed of knee-jerk patriots is making ready to punch Paul’s lights out. The authorities

decide to make the punishment official. They order Paul and Silas to be stripped. The two men are then severely beaten with clubs and finally flung into prison. The jailer is given strict orders to keep them under close guard. He does a pretty good job of it. He puts Paul and Silas into an inner prison, and fastens their feet down.

It is a dreary and hopeless situation. However, once more, as in Acts 5 and 12, we will see the divine intention open prison doors in a miraculous way.

This time, however, there is a difference. This time the door is opened, not for the jailed, but for the jailer.

— Acts 16: 16-24



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## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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In the midst of all the riots and beatings and persecutions in the Book of Acts, there are moments of conversion, moments of compassion and tenderness and sweetness of spirit. It is these intervals that interpret the harsher times, shape them, give them their meaning.

Often they are unexpected moments, made valuable by unexpected persons. The jailer at Philippi is such a person.

Paul and Silas have been forcibly checked into his establishment. He has been warned by the authorities to put them under heavy guard. First he ushers them into an inner cell where they join other prisoners. Then he puts their feet into stocks.

All this because they healed a girl? No. All this because the charge has been so twisted as to become political, and people tend to get riot-y should political prisoners escape.

The hours drag on, until now it is nearly midnight. It has undoubtedly been a miserable night for Paul and Silas. They are bruised from the beating administered by the city officials. Their feet are immobilized, surely causing pain and stiffness to leg and back muscles. It isn't likely they have eaten since morning. And they are surely utterly

fatigued. Most of us in such condition would likely swear a lot. Or even cry. Not Paul, not Silas. They pray and they sing. Even the other prisoners in that dark cell show interest in their hymns of praise. It is obvious Paul and Silas know God has not forgotten them.

Their jailer is about to discover that too. Abruptly into his sleep sounds the ominous and muffled roar that only an earthquake can make. Utter terror slams through the night, as the very foundations of the building shake. Meantime, inside that inner cell, the prisoners must feel like dice being shaken in a cup. Finally, the convulsion ends, and the dust settles.

"Look!" one of the prisoners surely says, "We are free to escape!" Sure enough, all of their shackles have yanked loose from the wall, and the prison door is standing wide open. Surprisingly, no one budes. Paul and Silas stay right where they are, and so do all the other prisoners.

The jailer, when he is able to stop bouncing around, runs down to check on his prisoners. Seeing the jail door open, his mind skids to a quick assumption. He flashes out his sword and directs it to his own heart. It seems better to him to die by his own hand than to endure the dishonor of allowing an escape.

Paul is quick to discern what is happening. He screams out, "Don't do it! Don't hurt yourself! Nobody escaped! We're all here!"

Hearing Paul's voice, the jailer yells over his shoulder, "Bring a light! Bring a light!" He rushes into the cell, torch held high. The prisoners are each one truly there.

With a trembling that probably has nothing to do with the earthquake, the jailor sinks to his knees before Paul



and Silas. Their reaction is not recorded. When he rises, the jailer leads the two men out of their cell. (What he does with the other prisoners, also now unbound, is also not recorded.)

Once outside, the jailer asks a question. Surely it suggests he is already well acquainted with the work of Paul and Silas in Philippi. It is sincere, even anxious: "What must I do, gentlemen, to be saved?"

There follows a quiet hour of fellowship, as the two prisoners preach their faith to the jailer and his whole household. The jailer is moved to compassion for Paul and Silas. They have become to him friends who need care. Tenderly he washes their wounds, cleansing and cooling the pain of their beatings.

The two prisoners then baptize the jailer into the faith, and with him his whole household. It is a lovely exchange. The jailer washes the aching outside of the prisoners, the prisoners wash the aching inside of the jailer. Then, still hovering over his new friends, the jailer gives them a meal before taking them back to their cells.

Luke closes this sensitive scene with the comment that the jailer and his family are now infused with great joy. Perhaps this is why Paul and Silas did not escape in the wake of the quake: perhaps they acted on superb insight into the ways of God. Their jailer would not have been saved if they had saved themselves.

— Acts 16: 25-34



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## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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We have seen jail doors open before in our story. When Peter was in prison in Jerusalem, the door swung open in the night, and he was quick to take his opportunity — and his leave.

Now Paul and Silas, in prison in Philippi, have found their jail door shaken open by an earthquake. Instead of making tracks, as did Peter, they practically take root. We have seen, however, that their evening in jail is not a total loss. Gained for the kingdom that night: one repentant jailer.

That accomplished, are Paul and Silas now ready to leave? Not really, not even when the city authorities are ready to have them leave. The charges against Paul and Silas, probably too hokey to stand, have been dropped. In the morning the jailer is instructed to release them. He is to do so with the admonition that they be on the next bus to Timbuctu, so to speak.

If the officials expect relief and gratitude from the two prisoners, they don't get them. What they do get is a little righteousness and a whole lot of stubbornness. It turns out Paul has an ace up his tunic that no one has ever suspected.

"Leave here quietly? No way!" he declares. "They whipped us in public, though we were not even convicted of any crime, and — we are Roman citizens! Are we now to sneak out of the city like criminals? You tell your Roman officers they can just come down here themselves to release us."

Roman citizens? It is a bombshell! Nobody — but nobody — has the right to beat a Roman citizen. Even Roman citizens who have been convicted of crime are not to be beaten, according to the law of the Roman empire. As Paul points out, he and Silas do not even stand convicted. The officials are appalled, and afraid of the consequences if Paul and Silas care to pursue the matter. They scoot on over to the jail and give the two men exactly what they ask for — an apology. Then, undoubtedly with a lot of nervous fawning, they lead Paul and Silas out of their prison.

Respectfully, the officials request that the two leave Philippi. The officials are sensitive to the tense atmosphere of the town. They know that with Paul and Silas free, there could be some further rioting.

Apparently the two men agree to leave. But first, just as Peter in his turn went from jail to Mary's home, Paul and Silas go from jail to Lydia's home. There the believers are anxiously gathering. Paul and Silas speak to these friends, pouring strength into them. And then they say farewell.

Philippi has shown a warm, gracious, loving face to Paul and Silas, in spite of the jail experience. It must be with a sense of deep loss that the two men are so suddenly parted from their friends. But it's down the

coast of the Aegean Sea they go, Paul, Silas and presumably Timothy — from Amphipolis to Appollonia and inward to Thessalonica, capital of Macedonia. Luke apparently stays behind in Philippi, judging from the fact that his “we” passages, for now at least, become “they” passages again.

We have seen that the backdrop changes a lot in Paul’s life, but never the “play,” so to speak. Now at Thessalonica, the “script” once again calls for heroes (Paul and company), and for villains (in this city, it is again establishment Jews who fill that role.)

The script also calls for the usual others;

1) A sympathetic character or two (here it is Jason, with whom Paul stays in Thessalonica)

2) Authorities of the Roman Empire

3) Converts (some Jews, many Godfearing Greeks, and many influential women of the town)

4) Excitable mobs (street ruffians, who would feel there was indeed a God in heaven if the day should bring a good riot.)

In Thessalonica, the play opens, as it almost always does, with Paul first seeking out a place of Jewish worship. The Thessies have one up on the Philippians — they have a synagogue. On three Sabbath days Paul faithfully goes to that synagogue, where once again he preaches Jesus’ death and resurrection.

“I tell you,” he urges, “Jesus is the Messiah!”

Enter the converts, joyful and eager to know more. Shortly thereafter, enter the villains, very jealous. Those Jews who will not repent, resent. Once more those in control feel their power dissipate, as more and more

people come to believe in the resurrection.

The struggle in Thessalonica is now defined: the power of the resurrection vs. the need for power on an earthly level.

Wot else is new?

— Acts 16: 35 – 17: 4

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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Question: When does a lazy bum look like a knight in shining armor to a high-ranking, generally conservative group of religious authorities?

Answer: When those authorities want to use bums to get Paul and Silas out of Thessalonica and out of their jealous hair. The plot is thickening (and that's really the word for it if you lisp a bit.)

These authorities are dignified, prestigious men of the Jewish hierarchy. Much as they would like to, they can't just run up and down the streets with their ecclesiastical robes flapping, screaming wild accusations against Paul and Silas. Still, creating a healthy little disturbance of the peace is not such a bad idea — provided, of course, they can get somebody else to do it. Why not enlist the rabble that hangs around the Thessalonica street corners everyday? Authorities today would call it "incitement to riot." The Thessalonian authorities probably just call it clever, as they are themselves the inciters.

The truth is, the street toughs probably couldn't care less about saving face for green-eyed authorities. But it does seem to promise a good riot — and who could ask

for more than that?

Perhaps the stampede is begun with a carefully planned soap-box harangue by one of the men of religious authority. The street people take their cue.

"Run Paul and Silas out of town!" one of them may have shouted.

"And get Jason for letting them stay at his house!" (So far as we know this is Paul's first acquaintance with Jason. Maybe Jason offered his home for hospitality on the strength of Paul's reputation.)

"Good idea! Let's get Jason!"

Swiftly, the whole city churns to a boil. Through all the uproar, it is possible one of Paul's friends runs to the home of Jason at frantic speed to warn the believers. By the time the mob huffs its way over there, Paul and Silas would make good hen's teeth.

The question is, if the household has indeed been warned, how come Jason hasn't split, too? Maybe he feels he will not be in danger from his own townspeople. However, this is a buzz-saw crowd, and it is made angrier by the disappointment of not finding Paul and Silas. In a furious temper, it will take whom it can get, and it can get poor Jason. He is dragged out of his home, along with some of the other believers, and hustled off to the civil authorities (because the religious officials know that their best chance of "getting" Paul is to get a good civil case going against him.)

Jason's accusers have to shout to be heard above the storming roar. "These men have turned the whole world upside down!" they whine. They mean Paul and Silas, though it is Jason and friends they hold figuratively —



and maybe literally — by the scruff of the neck. (They don't even seem to know, by the way, that they have just paid Paul and Silas a very nice compliment.)

"Now," complain the accusers, "they have come to our town, and Jason here has been letting them stay in his house!"

But being hospitable is really not a very impressive crime on Jason's part, so they turn to the real, genuine, false issue.

"They are breaking all the laws of our Emperor Caesar. They are saying there is a different king, one Jesus."

So — the charge is to be treason! This is, as the city riot-planners knew it would be, a terrible threat to the gathered throng. However, having Jason in their hands instead of Paul and Silas is a little like catching a cat by the tail and having the tail come off in your hand. You've got part of the cat, all right, but not the part that spits. The authorities finally decide to set bail for Jason and his friends, and let them go. Whether Jason and the others are tried at a later date, which bail seems to suggest, we don't know.

The play begins to wind down. Presumably the crowd breaks up. Darkness comes to Thessalonica. In an epilogue to this drama, the friends who rushed Paul and Silas into hiding now rush them out of Thessalonica. In the dead of night they are hustled off to Berea, fifty miles south.

Luke's condensed style of writing makes it appear that Paul was in Thessalonica only about three weeks. It was probably considerably longer. Paul's letter to

the Philippians shows that his dear friends in Philippi had sent financial help to him in Thessalonica. This happened “more than once,” (Phil. 4:16), which would not have occurred within three weeks’ time.

Now in Berea, Paul and Silas will be received warmly — but they have not heard the last from the angry authorities of Thessalonica.

— Acts 17: 4-10

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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Having been drop-kicked out of both Philippi and Thessalonica, Paul and Silas must be ready for a little tender, loving care. They find it in Berea.

The members of the synagogue here are unusually warm, receptive, and gracious. They are also refreshingly, eagerly, open to truth. Everyday they turn to the scriptures to search out for themselves the things Paul and Silas are teaching them.

The pattern of Berean conversions is very like that in other cities. Many Greeks, many women of high position, and some Jews embrace the new faith.

For Paul and Silas, embattled as they have been, the stay in Berea must seem a soothing balm, peaceful and healing. But there is soon to be a Thessalonian fly in this Berean ointment.

Remember the Jews who followed Paul from Iconium to Lystra on his first journey? Well, this time it is the Thessalonian Jews who don hiking sandals and bustle on over to Berea. Word has reached them that Paul and Silas are making friends (and converts!) there. Apparently the Thessalonians quickly succeed in mobilizing the Berean crowds into ready-to-riot mobs.

Paul's Berean friends, knowing of the riot in Thessalonica, must have an urgent sense of his danger. Immediately, they whisk him off to the coast. From there he is shipped off to the city of Athens, clear out of the Macedonian area. Considerately, the Bereans do not just "deport" him alone. A protective escort of concerned Berean friends goes with Paul all the way to Athens.

Conspicuous by their absence, however, are Timothy and Silas. It is possible that they hurriedly agreed to stay in Berea to give encouragement to the new believers for a few more days. But it seems more likely that they didn't really stay behind in Berea — they quite possibly got left behind. In the tumult and the shouting, it is possible Paul got yanked off to Athens before Silas and Timothy could even learn of the game plan. At any rate, Paul, in Athens, seems very concerned for them.

"Tell Tim and Silas to come to me as soon as they can," he urges his Berean friends. With what must be a tugging farewell, the Bereans then leave Paul in Athens and return home.

At this point there is a little variance between Luke's version of the story as he records it in the Book of Acts, and Paul's version as found in I Thessalonians. As we shall soon see, Luke thinks that Silas and Timothy join Paul later, in Corinth. Paul's version is that Timothy joins him in Athens, and that Paul sends him from there back to Thessalonica to convey his concern for the believers of that city, whom he also had to leave so very suddenly. (This difference is inconsequential. Even a family which goes through a common experience, say a vacation trip, will later have two or three different versions of the

progression of events.)

For a sense of Paul's love for that Thessalonian congregation, even in view of the spitefulness of the town's authorities, take time out to read his gentle letter which we call I Thessalonians. Through it we learn that Paul desperately wanted to return to his friends in Thessalonica, but "Satan hindered us." That could be a reference to the bail bond hanging over Jason's head in Thessalonica. Paul would not want to do anything that might cause harm to Jason and the others. Return, at this point, is obviously out of the question for him.

So, for now, at least, Paul is all alone in ancient Athens. He is certainly anxious, probably fatigued, and undoubtedly lonely. But as we shall see, he is not slowed down one bit. In Athens, as in all other places, he is irrepressibly God's man.

— Acts 17: 10-15



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## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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“Me and my shadow,  
All alone and feeling blue — ”

It isn't really very likely that Paul went soft-shoeing his way down the streets of Athens, humming this plaintive tune. But we do know he was indeed “all alone and feeling blue.” We know because, much later, he describes himself to the believers in Corinth as having been “weak and anxious and trembling” when in Athens (I Cor. 2: 3).

Paul, however, is not one to retire to his Athenian bed and flip the covers over his head. Instead, given his great sense of intellectual curiosity, surely he explores this ancient city into which he has been so suddenly flung.

The Athens Paul finds is still the intellectual, artistic and religious center of the Greek world. The maiden, however, is now a dowager; and the “the glory that was Greece” has become a faint and distant vision.

Still, Paul can see evidences of that glory all around him. The Areopagus, for instance. Now “Areopagus” may sound a little like some animal that Dr. Dolittle might befriend, but it is only a hill within the city. Well, not only a hill. It is also known as Mars Hill, the site

where the ancient gods held court.

Paul finds that the court of Athens, with which he is soon to become familiar, has also taken the name Areopagus (even though probably no longer located right on the hill.)

Surely, Paul examines every inch of the Acropolis, and also that other hill within the city, the one crested with monuments to ancient gods and goddesses. Surely he studies there the statues of Athena and Zeus and Artemis and the other folks the Greeks tend to put on a pedestal.

It is not only the Acropolis Paul finds graced by statues of deities. Scattered throughout the streets of this classical town there are other gods and goddesses, some great, some lesser. One monument, apparently, is even dedicated "to an unknown god." Obviously, the Athenians want to be sure all the bases are covered.

The statues Paul sees are exquisitely, sensuously draped figures whose beauty touches some sensitivity deep within the usual viewer. But Paul is not your basic viewer. He is so filled with the light of that tremendous experience, the resurrection, that nothing else has value or meaning beside it. He is, in fact, incensed. He sees only that the figures stand for divinities that don't even exist. He considers them an affront to the one true God who has made himself known in such a startling and direct way.

Paul decides to set the Athenians straight in his own startling and direct way. As it happens, he can find opportunity on almost every street corner to involve himself in polite argument. With a bit of droll humor,



Luke tells us, "Everyone in Athens seems obsessed with anything new and different. All they ever do is stand around and ask, "What's new?""

Luke is careful to tell us, however, that first Paul runs true to form: first he goes to the synagogue to do his "arguing" with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. That rather dutifully said, Luke moves on to more remarkable news: Paul also goes down to the public square everyday to square off with whomever is there. These open air discussions are usually dominated by two very vocal "schools" of philosophy: those who consider themselves to be Epicureans and those who consider themselves to be Stoics. Epicureans thought it neat to be happy in this life, but they did not believe in life after death. The Stoics, on the other hand, thought it admirable to be indifferent to pleasure or pain in this life, but they did believe in an afterlife.

In either case, if it were something new and different they yearn for, they've got it in Paul. And if ever there were an answer to the question "What's new?" it is the stunning answer Paul will speak so fervently to these worshippers of non-existent gods: "Resurrection!"

— Acts 17: 16-21



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## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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“What is this bird talking about, anyway?”

The street corner philosophers of Athens are puzzled. The red-eared Paulus Argumentatus stands in their market place and chirps away at them about a resurrection. They probably do not understand all of his words, much less their meaning. He appears to them to be a seedpicker, one who snatches up tidbits of ideas and babbles them out again.

Some of the Athenians understand him just enough to confuse the issue. “He seems to be a preacher of some sort of foreign gods: Jesus and Resurrection.” The implication, according to some scholars, is that these logical Athenians assume that Jesus and Resurrection are male and female deities, a matched set.

Guffaw though we may, still we can see it is a natural conclusion for the Athenians. They worship a multiplicity of gods, and have for many centuries. How much more plausible a pair of deities seems to them than the preposterous idea that a man who died could actually come back to life.

Whatever its conclusions about Paul, this market place audience is at least intrigued. Someone there

suggests that maybe Paul ought to talk to the Areopagus, the assembled court of Athens. The crowd seems to half-invite, half-jostle him on down to the meeting.

There is no hassle about it, though. "It's just that you've been telling us some strange stuff," they say to him. "We really would like to know what it's all about."

"I'll *bet* they would like to know what it's all about," writer Luke in effect interjects. "It's something new, isn't it?"

Paul walks to the center of the Areopagus, where he can be clearly seen and heard. This is his big chance to move Athens away from the worship of many gods and turn it toward the one true God.

"Men of Athens!" he begins. "As I look around me here I can tell that you are extremely religious. As I walk through your city I see a lot of places where you worship."

(Is Paul buttering the Athenians so they'll be a more receptive audience? Or is he being just a tad sarcastic?)

"I even found one altar," he continues, "dedicated 'To an unknown God.' This god you worship without knowing, I will now introduce to you!"

(That's the attention-getter, the two-by-four. Could this brassy foreigner whose mother dresses him funny really be acquainted with a god the men of Athens don't know?)

"This God made the world and everything in it! This God is Lord of heaven and Lord of earth! This God does not live in buildings that humans put up — and does not need anything that we humans can make! After all,

it is this God who gives us life and breath and everything else."

(That certainly gets to the heart of the worship of many gods. It really doesn't leave very much for any other god to do.)

"This God made all races of men and women, and gave them the whole earth to live on. This God decided ahead of time exactly when and where each race should live. The intention is that each nation should look for this God that they might touch and discover God."

(Paul is using a back-door approach, more philosophical than religious. He usually uses Jewish scriptures to hang his speeches on. To do so with this audience, though, would have been about as useful as cream on pilchards.)

"God is not far from any one of us, you know," Paul continues, "for 'We live and move and have our very existence in God.' In fact, some of your own poets have said, 'We are surely God's children.'"

(Paul's familiarity with these two Greek quotations may mean he got an A in Greek literature, or it may mean they were familiar quotations of the time.)

"If we are God's children, then we should know God's nature is not like anything we can make out of gold or silver or stone or any other materials we like to build with. Up to now, God has overlooked our ignorance about this. But now, God calls us — everyone, everywhere — to turn away from false worship, because there will be a day for judging the whole world. It will be done with justice, through a man God only has chosen."

(So far, Paul at least has the interest of his audience.

He is about to blow it.)

“God has given us assurance of this man’s righteousness by raising him from the dead.”

(Raising him from the dead??? Jeer! Scoff! Hoot!)

The sophisticates in the crowd have heard enough. Fortunately, there is no rioting, but there is a lot of rudeness. Paul’s moment in Athens comes to a halt; though, as we will see, all is not lost.

— Acts 17: 18-32

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## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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Paul doesn't seem to have a very good batting average in Athens. In fact, the score for his side looks like Orphan Annie's eyes — 00. It is apparent the Athenian sages think of Paul, for all his great intelligence, as a country yokel in the big city. His words of truth fall as folklore on their ears. In response to his speech to the Areopagus Council, they poke fun at him.

Their scoffing shatters Paul's opportunity to make any real impact on Athens. Even so, on second look, all is not a complete loss.

"We'd like to hear more," he is told by a few men and women who come up to him after the speech. That must have taken real courage in view of the prevailing scorn.

More startling, there are even a few who profess their faith. Most surprising is Dionysius, for he is a member of the Areopagus Council. The only other Athens convert that writer Luke considers important enough to name is a woman, Damaris. That is all we know of either Dionysius or Damaris.

That is also all we know of Paul's stay in Athens, except that he cut it short. So how do we sift down,

evaluate, this strange interlude? It's true there are no riots here as in other cities, no imprisonment, and no need to escape in the dark of night. But there are also no friends, few converts, and no church that Luke records that springs up as a result of Paul's efforts. For that reason, some say Paul is a failure in Athens.

However, given the shaken condition he was in when he arrived, and his loneliness, and the language difference, the wonder is not that he does not "succeed," but that he has the guts and grace to try. Apparently, he also has the wisdom to know that discretion is the better part of valor. Very soon after the Great Areopagus Debacle, he leaves Athens and hies on down to the cosmopolitan city of Corinth.

Paul is to find Corinth a city of contrasts.

If someone should smile sweetly at you and say, "You act like a Corinthian," kick that person in the instep. You have not been complimented. That's the way the people of Paul's day described someone of immoral character. However, the high-living, free-spirited Corinthians are also noted for their great artistic treasures.

There are other contrasts, also. Corinth's two great seaports bring in dates from Phoenicia, ivory from Libya, carpets from Babylon, many other riches from many other countries. Yet the streets are crowded with poor.

Historically Greek, the Corinth Paul finds is now a Roman-ruled city. And for all its licentious idol worship, the city of Corinth has a synagogue and a good many Jews. This may be why Aquila, who is a maker of tents,



and his wife Priscilla, have just decided to settle in Corinth.

They are refugees of a snit which Emperor Claudius has worked himself into. Around 49 A.D. some sort of Jewish disturbance takes place in Rome. Claudius thereupon orders all Jews to leave the city. Probably not many of them pay much attention to him, but Aquila and his wife pick up their tents and silently steal away.

They arrive in Corinth just about the same time Paul does. At this point Luke tells us something we have not previously known about Paul: he also earns his living making tents. Even if it were not so, knowing Paul as we do, if one were to ask, "What's your line?" he could answer, "I'm intense."

In some way, Paul hears about Aquila and Priscilla. He decides to pay them a social call. Paul has gone through some pretty lonely experiences lately. Maybe he senses that Aquila, Priscilla and he will have a lot in common. They are all Jews (the believers in Christ, remember, were still considered either Jews or Gentiles), they are all tentmakers, and they have all just arrived in Corinth. One gets the feeling, in fact, that Aquila has not even had time to get established in his business yet.

So well do these three tentmakers hit it off together, there is never a flap among them. Aquila and Priscilla not only invite Paul to live with them, but to join in their business as well, perhaps to canvass the neighborhood.

In what may have been one visit, Paul has acquired two new friends, a place to live, and a good job. It is not a bad start for him in Corinth. All that gloom and

loneliness he experienced in Athens is to be dispelled now by what are probably the warmest and dearest friendships of his life.

— Acts 17: 32 – 18: 3

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## CHAPTER FIFTY

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"It's your funeral! I won't be responsible! From now on I'm going to do my preaching to the Gentiles!"

Yep. It's Paul — beset, bothered and bewildered once again by the refusal of synagogue-goers to take him seriously. Sabbath after sabbath he shows up in the synagogue in Corinth to tell the resurrection news to the Jews. And here, as in other cities, anything so divergent as fresh truth gets rebuffed by the formal synagogue atmosphere. Both synagogue Jew and synagogue Greek once again oppose and even insult Paul.

Very human indeed is Paul's response to that. He shakes his clothes out in their presence, an ancient way of saying, "Eeychh! I don't even want your dust around to remind me of you."

If the synagogue syndrome is a downer for Paul, surely the arrival of Silas and Timothy effervesce him up a bit. They have finally caught up to him here in Corinth. Paul has been anxious for their welfare ever since the two got separated from him in the confusion at Berea. What relief and joy he must feel once again to embrace his dear friends and to know they were not harmed in the Berean hassle.

With their arrival in Corinth, Paul quits putting tents together for a living. He can now give full time to his preaching. He is able to do so because Silas and Timothy apparently bring with them an offering from Macedonia churches (Philippians 4:15-16), for whom Paul has especially tender feelings. Perhaps in addition, his two helpers now pitch in with work of their own to keep Paul eating three squares a day.

Paul now makes what is probably the most annoying move possible as far as the Jewish hierarchy of that city is concerned. Having just wadded up and thrown away his dog-eared relationship to the synagogue, he makes the house next door to it his headquarters.

It is the home of one Titius Justus, a God-fearer, a Gentile who believes in the Jewish God. And now, probably to the distress of some of his Jewish friends, Justus believes in the Christ of this foreigner, Paul. He must have a lot of courage, this Justus — or a Quixotic sense of humor. To invite Paul to make his headquarters in his home next door to the synagogue is about like giving the synagogue the Bronx cheer.

If the welcome of Paul by Titius Justus shakes up the Jews, we can imagine the scandal and gossip and buzzing when no less a person than the ruler of the synagogue is converted by Paul. His name is Crispus, and not only he but his whole family become believers.

Crispus is surely filled with joy. The months ahead will surely be filled with new happiness of spirit. Clearly, he is a merry Crispus, with a Happy New Year.

In addition to Justus and Crispus, there are many other Corinthians who hear Paul, and believe, and are

baptized. Still, the threat of the hostile synagogue must hang heavy over Paul. He has confronted the power of synagogue Jews before. Paul, however, is a little like a Hebrew National Hotdog: he has to answer to a higher authority. Dramatic confirmation that he is where the Lord wants him to be, doing what the Lord wants him to do, comes to him one night in a vision.

“Don’t be afraid of anyone in Corinth,” the Lord says to Paul. “Keep on telling people about me. Don’t stop. I am with you. No one here shall attack you. You will not be hurt. There are many in this city who understand and believe.”

What reassurance that vision must give to Paul! God has said “Yes!” to his work in Corinth.

— Acts 18: 4-11



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## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

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When God told Paul he would be protected in Corinth, God wasn't kidding. The Jewish conservatives can't even whup up a successful case against Paul.

Not that they don't try. At one point the anger of the synagogue congregation spews up like Mt. St. Helen's. What triggers it, we don't know, but the mob works itself up to a pretty good pitch, then pounces upon Paul and rushes him off to court. If they can get him jailed or banished, things might go back to normal again.

It isn't exactly a small claims court they take him to. It is the court of Gallio, the Roman governor of Greece. (That, by the way, tells us just about exactly when Paul was in Corinth, for Gallio was governor in A.D. 51-52.)

Gallio has the reputation of being a just and good man. The great Roman philosopher, Seneca, even called him "sweet." But then Seneca was Gallio's brother.

Paul stands there before sweet Gallio and listens to the charges the synagogue is trumping up against him.

"This man is trying to get people to worship God in an illegal way!"

It is true Paul is proclaiming Jesus as Messiah, and to some Jews that is a very unsettling and anti-social

act. But the charge of illegality is still a large slice of baloney. There is no law in Corinth at this early time which forbids anyone from worshipping any god — or any God — in any way he or she chooses.

Paul opens his mouth to defend himself — but is surprised at the voice he hears. It is the voice of Gallio, who interrupts him before he even gets started.

"Settle this thing yourselves!" he scathes. "If this were a matter of some crime having been committed, you could expect me to be patient. But I do not intend to be the judge of your petty arguments about words or names or even your law!"

The synagogue troops must be surprised, shocked down to their Roman sandals. And if Gallio's speech doesn't do it, his order probably does: "Out! Get out of this court!" It is a strong directive. No way will Gallio whine.

It is probable that Paul is allowed to stay in the court until the mob skulks its way out. Or perhaps he is let out a back way. In any case, he apparently is out of reach of the crowd, which is not in a pretty mood.

Unfortunately, however, some poor soul named Sosthenes shows up at the wrong place at the wrong time. He is grabbed and beaten right there in front of the court. Governor Gallio couldn't care less. He refuses to have anything at all to do with this essentially trivial quarrel.

Curiously, we are left with two big questions. Who is Sosthenes, anyway? And who is it that gave him the beating?

We do know that Sosthenes is the leader of the synagogue, but that still leaves us puzzled. Did he, for



instance, directly succeed Crispus? If so, maybe he was the brains behind the attempt to try Paul. In that case, it could have been Jews who beat him, turning upon the man who led them into humiliation.

Or, was Sosthenes another name for Crispus? If so, perhaps the Jews take this opportunity to get even with Crispus for “going over,” for becoming a believer in Christ. This is at least a possibility, as Paul mentions a Sosthenes in his first letter to the Corinthians (1:1), saying Sosthenes sends his greetings.

There is one more possibility. Perhaps Sosthenes was beaten up by the Greeks, not the Jews. As ruler of the synagogue, he would make good fodder for any Greeks revelling in the embarrassment of the Jews caused by the Roman governor.

Anyway we look at it, poor Sosthenes has three strikes against him — and they are the kind that raise lumps.

Paul, however, seems relatively undisturbed by this dust-up. For a total of eighteen months, he stays on in Corinth, preaching and teaching among the Gentiles.

— Acts 18: 12-17



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## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

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“Go with you? Sure! Uh... where?”

Priscilla and Aquila are willing, but possibly a bit puzzled. Sometime after the tussle in Gallio's court, their friend Paul seems to feel an urge to hit the road again. Apparently he says in effect:

“I want to go back to Syrian Antioch. But have I got plans for you two! How about going with me as far as Ephesus? You could stay there and lay a little groundwork for me while I go on to Syria. I'd get back to you in Ephesus as soon as possible.”

So Priscilla and Aquila are now to become traveling missionaries with Paul. They once took Paul into their business. Now he's got them into his.

The believers in Corinth embrace them all goodbye, and the three head on down to Cenchreae, the port of Corinth. They will sail from there to Ephesus.

The information Luke gives us about this trip is a lot like a flashing strobe light. Light is splashed on an event, then flashes off so fast we can't see what went on before or after it.

For instance, in one strange sentence, Luke tells us that before Paul sets sail from Cenchreae, he gets himself

a haircut. Some versions even say he gets his head shaved. He does it because he has taken a vow.

Blank! Off goes the strobe. We are left in the dark. What vow? We suspect it is in connection with the Nazarite sect, whose members never drink wine nor cut their hair. A person could become a Nazarite for thirty days to commemorate something in his life, then offer up the hair grown in the interim. But what was Paul commemorating? And what was the exact nature of his vow? And would he offer up all his hair, or just the part of it?

Blink! The strobe flashes on again and we see Priscilla, Aquila and little baldy Paul sail from Cenchreae, and arrive safely at Ephesus. Ephesus! Finally, Paul gets his chance at this ancient city. Long ago he wanted to come to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit said, "Come on over to Macedonia," instead. Now he is here and he will do things the way he always does: he will go first to the synagogue to debate with the Jews. But Priscilla and Aquila, Luke tells us, don't accompany him to the synagogue.

Blunk! On the strobe flashes again, to show Paul surrounded by the Jews of the synagogue — friendly types for a change. They are pleading with him to stay a long time.

"I cannot," he is saying. "Not now. If it is God's will, I will come back to you."

What monumental irony! At last Paul gets a warm and eager synagogue welcome, and he just smiles and says, "Catch you later, guys."

Blonk! Out goes the light again. Why all this need

to hustle on? Has there been some sort of urgent news from Jerusalem, or from Antioch? Does the vow Paul took have to be completed in Jerusalem within a strict time frame, as some Bible versions seem to indicate?

Bleenk! The light flashes on again, and we see Paul sail from Ephesus and arrive in Caesarea, where Philip had preached, and where Peter converted Cornelius and his friends, and where Herod retreated to suck his thumb after Peter escaped from prison in Jerusalem.

Paul doesn't spend much time here. Instead he goes immediately to Jerusalem to pay his respects to the mother church. That done, he finally heads on up to Antioch.

Antioch is home base for Paul. Years ago Barnabas called him here to help administrate the billowing Antioch membership, and it is this fellowship that has twice commissioned Paul to travel all over the world to share the good news of the resurrection.

While here, does Paul ask about an old friend no longer in Antioch — Barnabas? Or is the quarrel between the two still too tender an issue?

Finally, Paul does go back to Ephesus, as he promised he would. But first he visits the provinces of Phrygia and Galatia, giving strength and renewed hope to the churches there.

Bloonk! Off goes the light again. Why does Paul take such a circuitous route back to Ephesus? Galatia and Phrygia are fairly northerly, and Priscilla and Aquila are waiting for him at Ephesus.

Frustrating though it is, Luke's strobe style here serves as the transition between Paul's second mission-

ary journey, which ends with his arrival at Antioch, and his third journey, which begins with his travels through Galatia and Phrygia. We shall see that this third journey is to be an especially emotional one for Paul, and it is to be his last one as a free man.

— Acts 18: 18-23

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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While Paul is making the rounds of the provinces, Priscilla and Aquila are in Ephesus setting up the Corporation for Making Tents and Converts. (Converts while you wait, tents may take a little longer.)

At this point, there may be some small satisfaction for women: as Luke continues his story he now mentions Priscilla's name before Aquila's. Has Priscilla's work for the faith grown more significant than her husband's? Or was Luke simply not one to be hung up on male-first traditions?

In either case, Priscilla must have been a special lady. In his letter to the Romans, Paul calls her by a nickname, Prisca. Prisca is a respected old Roman name. That Paul uses it in speaking of Priscilla to Roman Christians may tell us something of his affection for her.

In whatever order and by whatever name, husband and wife Priscilla and Aquila devote their time and energies to sharing with Ephesians their deep and transforming experience of Jesus' resurrection.

Enter now Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila, it turns out, are not the only traveling missionaries in the area. From Alexandria, in Egypt, comes a shining star of a man who

also loves their Lord and who stands up in the synagogue to say so.

Apollos' eloquence in the synagogue shows a fine grasp of the Scriptures, as well as of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. However, impressive as Apollos is, Priscilla and Aquila do sense something is missing. It seems to them that Apollos knows only the baptism of repentance — baptism as John taught it. He apparently has not experienced the baptism in which the spirit of Christ flows through one's life. So, after synagogue one day, they invite Apollos to their home. Perhaps it is after a sabbath meal that these two tentmakers tell this glamorous newcomer to Ephesus that they think he is a wonderful speaker — *but...*

Another man of Apollos' popularity might pooch out his lower lip and get defensive. Not Apollos. He seems genuinely receptive to learning about the Holy Spirit.

The encounter with Priscilla and Aquila appears to be warm and loving, and Apollos appears to be a new man afterwards. Anxious to tell others what he now knows of the teachings of Christ, he thinks maybe he'll start in Greece. Those Christians Priscilla and Aquila have gathered around them in Ephesus give Apollos their full loving support. They even write to the believers in Greece, urging them to make him welcome.

As it turns out, he is received as well in Greece as he was in Ephesus. He seems tireless in debating against those Jews who are tradition-bound, and tireless in proving that Jesus is the Messiah. So effective is he, in fact, that later on Paul will find it necessary to go "tsk-tsk" at the Corinthians for choosing up sides be-



tween him and Apollos. "I may have done the planting" Paul writes, "and Apollos may have done the watering, but it was God who made the seed grow!" (I Cor. 3: 5-6)

Meantime, Apollos and Paul do an Abbott and Costello routine. Paul touches base in Ephesus, then runs to Antioch. Apollos comes to Ephesus while Paul is away, then scoots to Greece. While Apollos is thus gone from Ephesus, Paul zips on back to it. Who's on first?

Shortly after his return to Ephesus, Paul encounters a dozen disciples who seem to be one-dimensional in their faith, as Apollos once had been. Always direct, Paul comes right out and asks, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?"

Their answer is pretty direct, too: "What's a Holy Spirit?"

Probably taken a whole lot aback, Paul probes further. "Well, if you haven't even heard of the Holy Spirit, what kind of baptism did you receive?"

"The baptism of John," they reply.

As we have seen, John's baptism is for those who repent, who turn from their sins, which is not too tacky in itself. But Paul knows there is more.

"John also told the people of Israel that they should believe in one who was coming after him," he explains. "That person is Jesus."

It is an earnest, truthful and simple statement. Confirming it, and making it more poignant, Paul baptizes these twelve men then and there. As he lays his hands upon them, they are filled with new power. They speak in the sounds of "tongues," now familiar to the early believers, and they tell forth God's word.

Paul's ministry in Ephesus has begun with his touching

the lives of twelve men. Before it ends, “all of the people who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Gentiles” will have heard the words of the Lord. (Acts 19:10)

— Acts 18: 24 – 19: 7

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

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See the glittering temple of the great goddess Artemis!  
Take home little silver souvenir temples, handcrafted  
by world-renowned artisans!

Transact your business in our secure and famous banks!

What a brochure the city of Ephesus could have put together in Paul's day. But perhaps it wasn't really needed — many people from many places were drawn to Ephesus anyway. Which, of course, is why Paul so much wanted to preach here. He knew it would be like preaching to bees on the wing. As people moved back and forth from Ephesus they would quickly pollinate outlying areas with the word.

Paul himself achieves what must be some sort of record — for him — in Ephesus. He gets to preach in the synagogue three whole months before things get too tense for him. By then some in the congregation are growling around a lot, denying all that Paul has to say about the way of the Lord. Once more Paul chooses not to waste his energies defending what needs no defense. By separating himself from the synagogue, he can continue to preach, without constant harassment.

Naturally, those who are already his followers move

out of the synagogue with him. The question is, where can they all go that is centrally located? No Titius Justus lives next door to the synagogue, as in Corinth. Paul settles for (and in) the hall of Tyrannus. Perhaps he pays rent for the hall, or maybe he accepts hospitality from its landlord, or maybe he just exercises squatter's rights. In any case, the lecture hall of Tyrannus becomes the preaching hall of Paul.

Paul holds discussion meetings here, and preaches about the Kingdom of God, day in and day out, every day of the week for two years. As a result, everyone in the province, both Jews and Gentiles, have their chance to hear the word.

Eager to illustrate Paul's success, writer Luke relates two incidents that occur in Ephesus. One shows Luke's fascination with miracle; the other his revulsion of its opposite — magic.

Luke wants it known that God works more than just your casual, every day miracle through Paul in Ephesus. Here, he tells us, handkerchiefs and aprons that have touched Paul's body are carried to the sick, and they are healed. (The sick, not the handkerchiefs.)

Luke then contrasts this miracle experience with a story of magic gone wrong. He tells of traveling magicians, Jews, who try to cash in on the name of Jesus. Among them are the seven sons of a high priest named Sceva. Parenthetically, there is no other record anywhere of any Jewish high priest named Sceva. Possibly Mr. Sceva affectionately bestowed this title upon himself.

At any rate, his seven sons make the mistake of trying to drive out an evil spirit using the name of Jesus in the

context of their “magic.” They stand before the person who has the spirit and solemnly declare, “I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches.”

Evil spirit couldn’t care less. “I know Jesus and I know Paul, but who in the world are you?”

What a blow to the seven sons’ collective ego! Imagine being so unimportant as to be rejected by a totally unimpressed evil spirit! They are not to be ignored long, however. Suddenly the man with the evil spirit attacks them with a whirlwind violence. He bloodies them all. He also manages to tear off all their clothes. How humiliating — it’s seven against one, and all seven run out of the house wearing bruises and not a thing more.

The story quickly buzzes its way around Ephesus. The picture of seven naked magicians flailing their way out of that house and flashing down the street does not amuse most Ephesian believers. Instead it fills them with panic. And with good reason. It seems that most of them have themselves been secretly dabbling in magic.

They come now to confess, and to praise the Lord, who will not let his name be used falsely. Soon people are even bringing their books on magic to be burned in a public bonfire.

So swiftly does this impulse sweep over the city that when the fire is lit, magic books, totaling in value over 50,000 pieces of silver, go up in smoke, and that is no illusion.

In spite of the fact that we wonder if Luke’s tongue isn’t sometimes caught in his cheek as he tells this story, the incident is obviously impressive to the Ephesians. Because of it, more and more people in more and more places hear the word of the Lord, and believe.



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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

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The Great Book Burning Episode of Ephesus at least shows that the Ephesians are bound to turn over a new leaf. Paul apparently feels ready now to go on to Macedonia and Greece. He would then return to Jerusalem, perhaps with a gift offering from those two provinces.

"After that," Paul says, speaking aloud a special dream, "I must see Rome also."

But for now he sends out his advance publicity men, Timothy and a friend named Erastus, to prepare Macedonia and Greece for his visit. Maybe he should have gone with them while the getting was good. After two years in Ephesus, his effectiveness is beginning to tarnish the reputation of the town's famous silversmiths, and that's trouble.

The problem centers around a prominent businessman, Demetrius. His business is failing, and he blames Paul. He calls all his workers together one day, and some of his competitors, too.

"Men, you know we have all made a good living, making silver models of the Temple of the goddess Artemis. Now our profits are falling off. It's all because this guy Paul is going around saying that gods made by men are

not gods at all. People just aren't buying like they used to, not only here in Ephesus, but in the whole province. Furthermore, our business is getting a bad name! The time may even come when the sanctuary of our great goddess Artemis will mean nothing at all! Should it come to this for the goddess who is worshipped by everyone in our province — and all over the world?"

The crowd responds on beat: "Great is Artemis of Ephesus! Great is Artemis of Ephesus!" It is a mindless chant, swelled by those who have run to see what all the ruckus is about.

Excitement snowballs. Someone grabs Gaius and Aristarchus, hitherto unmentioned by Luke, traveling companions of Paul. Towing them along, the crowd jostles and shouts its way down to the huge theater of Ephesus.

The news reaches Paul. His impulse is to rush to the center of the action. The believers, however, refuse to let him. Simultaneously, messengers arrive from some local authorities, friends of Paul, begging him not to show himself in the theater.

Meanwhile, the riot is intensifying. Some men are shouting one thing, others something else. Most people don't even know why they are there in a gathering mob.

Jews of the city apparently fear all this will turn into an anti-Jewish campaign. Frantically, they push a man named Alexander up to the front. We can imagine their blurted instructions: "Alex! Quick! Tell them we Jews are not responsible for Paul or for Demetrius or for anything else they're so angry about!"

It's no good. The plan backfires. Some of the crowd conclude it is Alexander himself who is responsible.



Alexander must have considerable standing in the community for the Jews to gamble on the crowd listening to him, and for the crowd to think he was at the center of the riot.

He raises his hand for quiet, but immediately the cry goes up, "He is a Jew!" From there it is down hill all the way. In the best of mob fashion, the crowd proceeds to drown out Alexander's voice.

Over and over again the mob shouts, "Great is Artemis of Ephesus!" For two whole hours they keep up the chant, demonstrating, if nothing else, an extremely high boredom threshold. Finally, the city clerk, obviously both brave and wise, steps before the crowd. "Men of Ephesus!" he shouts. The crowd eventually calms down enough to hear.

"Men of Ephesus! Doesn't everyone in the world already know that Ephesus is the guardian of the Temple of Artemis? And of the sacred stone that fell down from heaven?" This alludes to what may have been a meteorite, roughly shaped like a woman, that was revered as symbolic of Artemis. Was the speaker pointing out that Artemis was not a goddess made by men?

"Nobody can deny what I have just said!" he continues. "So why are you so uptight? Just calm down. Don't do anything rash. You've got these men here, and they haven't even done anything. It's not like they'd robbed the Temple or said anything really bad about Artemis. If Demetrius and the rest have accusations against anyone, let them go to the regular courts, or to the authorities! Beyond that, it will have to be settled in a legal meeting of the citizens — not here! Do you realize we could all be accused of rioting here today? Rome will accept no

excuse for this behavior!"

The uproar eventually wanes. When it does, Paul calls his followers together. Obviously, for him to stay longer in Ephesus could bring harm to his friends as well as himself. As we have seen, his plans are already laid anyway. So, after speaking words of courage to the believers of Ephesus, Paul sets off once more for Macedonia.

— Acts 19: 21 – 20: 1

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

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Talk about inglorious endings! Two good years in Ephesus, and once more the Cauliflower Kid is out on his ear. Paul doesn't take it too hard, though. He was planning to leave anyway — Timothy and Erastus are waiting for him in Macedonia.

Paul hesitates long enough after the silversmiths' riot to say goodbye to the good friends whose lives would be in jeopardy were he to stay in Ephesus. Then he sets out by land, encouraging people in the faith all along the way.

At this point in the narrative, Luke pulls the old dangle-a-carrot-in-front-of-the-donkey trick. The reader gets enough information to keep him or her reading, but doesn't get any of the carrot, doesn't get any of the details.

Paul makes it to Greece, Luke tells us that much, and stays there three months. But that's all Luke chooses to say about this visit, or at least until Paul is ready to leave. We have to go to Paul's letters for a taste of the carrot.

The letter to Romans was probably written at this time. In it, Paul indicates what his major work in Corinth is to be this trip. He is to take up a collection for the Jerusalem church. (Luke does refer to this offering later, in Acts 24:17, but only rather casually.)

When Paul is ready to leave Greece, Luke gives us the carrot treatment again. He dangles in front of us still another plot to do Paul harm. Some Jews are out to get Paul, and he learns of it just as he is preparing to sail off with the offering for Jerusalem.

Discretion being the better part of valor, Paul decides not to sail, but to take a land route back through Macedonia. The hope, of course, is to leave the plotters holding the bag, empty, at the port.

But we don't get a bite of that carrot, either. What kind of plot was in the making? Was it a plan to kill Paul for the same old jealousy reasons? Or was it to rob him of the money he had collected? And who told Paul about it? Was there just a rumor floating around, or was there a specific sympathetic informer? Or even a greedy one hoping for reward?

These little tidbits Luke drops tantalize rather than satisfy. He does, however, pause long enough to rattle off the names of seven men who go with Paul through Macedonia. The most familiar of these is Timothy. And we are relieved to find Gaius and Aristarchus among them, as we last saw them in the hands of the silversmith rioters in Ephesus. Trophimus, about whom we'll hear more, is also among them.

From Philippi the seven men go on ahead of the party to "wait for us at Troas," Luke states. So the "we" passages, left off last in this same Philippi, begin again. Luke has rejoined Paul and his party.

If Paul hadn't taken the long way round to avoid getting mauled, he might have been in Jerusalem for Passover. Instead he pauses in Philippi for this ancient celebration.

Surely he visits there with Lydia, seller of purple dye, his first European convert, his dear friend, (though such visit is not recorded.)

After Passover, Paul and Luke sail from Philippi to join the others in Troas. The voyage takes five days this time. Earlier, on the second missionary journey, traveling in the other direction, the same voyage took only two days. (Maybe Paul has gained some weight.)

The previous stay in Troas was quite possibly for only one night — but it had significantly changed Paul's life. "Come on over to Macedonia," the Holy Spirit had urged him, and thus began these journeys to Philippi and Corinth.

This time Paul will stay in Troas for a whole week. But it will be for his last night there that he will be remembered. On that night a tragic accident will occur. But Paul will turn it into a miracle.

— Acts 20: 1-6



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## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

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“Dead as a doornail!” That is the expression used to describe Old Morley, Scrooge’s ghostly visitor, in “A Christmas Carol” (shades of Charles Dickens). In Acts 20 there is a young man named Eutychus who is at least that dead. He has tumbled out of a third story window.

It happens on a Saturday night as the believers of Troas are gathered for Paul’s last sermon before he continues on to Jerusalem. The believers here surely feel pleased and excited to have had Paul in Troas for a week. As for Paul, there is so much to say, so much to explain and to discuss, he wants to get it all in before he leaves in the morning.

He speaks on and on. It gets later and later. The atmosphere gets smokier and smokier from the many lamps that have been brought in to lighten the room. Eutychus, of whom we know only that he is young, gets sleepier and sleepier. Perhaps in an effort to get some fresh air to wake himself up, he moves to an open window and sits in its frame. But somewhere around midnight, sleep catches up with young Eutychus.

Perhaps it is his mother who first becomes aware that something is terribly wrong: “My God! Eutychus! Where

is Eutychus?"

Surely, Paul darts his eyes to the window, then cuts off his preaching with a gasp. The window frame is empty. There is undoubtedly a stunned moment as everyone realizes what a terrible thing that empty frame means. Then, with cries of shock and alarm, everyone is running, pounding, down those three flights of outside stairs.

"Go back! Bring a lamp!" someone may have called. When it comes, they examine Eutychus where he lies, and they know he is dead.

"Let me get to him! Please! Let me get to him!" Paul may have cried. Reaching the limp and quiet form, Paul bends down and enfolds Eutychus in his arms. Perhaps he is consciously imitating the embraces used by two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, to restore life to two young men of old (I Kings 17:21 and II Kings 4:34). In the case of Elisha, the scripture clearly says he put "his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, his hands upon his hands..." Is it just possible that Elisha, and by implication Elijah and Paul, were breathing life back into the young men, perhaps an ancient form of CPR?

In either case, it is a miracle. With Eutychus cradled in his arms, Paul looks up at the ashen-faced friends huddling around, and he comforts them. "Hush, hush. He is going to be all right. His soul is still in him."

We can imagine the immense — Luke says immeasurable — relief and rejoicing felt by all as Eutychus' loved ones take him home — alive. In spite of the fall, Eutychus himself doesn't feel down.

Surely emotionally drained, and filled with gratitude for the miracle, Paul and the rest of the fellowship go back



up the stairs. There they break bread together in a farewell communion. As good friends often do who have just shared a crisis, they stay up and talk all night. But when daylight comes, Paul must finally take his leave of the believers of Troas. Luke and the others are waiting for him on board ship at the port city of Assos.

Writer Luke makes it plain that Paul has sent him (Luke) and the rest of the party on ahead, preferring to take the road rather than sail the twenty miles to Assos with them. He doesn't tell us why Paul did so, but it may be that Paul simply needed some solitude.

When Paul does come on board, the ship sets sail for Miletus, and Luke carefully records every little town they touch during the three day voyage. We see that the ship billows right past Ephesus. The reason, according to Luke, is that Paul is anxious to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. He tactfully refrains from noting that the most likely thing to prevent Paul from getting to Jerusalem on time would be a punching-out by those silversmiths in Ephesus. For Paul, and for the believers of Ephesus, it would still be dangerous were he to return there just now.

But Paul had spent two years in Ephesus, and has many friends there. He had to leave those friends terribly abruptly. He will not now leave the territory without saying goodbye.

So it is that the leaders of the church at Ephesus receive a message from Paul. Could they please come to Miletus? It is surely a measure of their esteem for Paul that these church leaders travel the thirty miles from Ephesus to Miletus just to have some final moments with him.

It proves to be worth their trouble. When they are all together, Paul opens his inner spirit to them in what may be the most brooding, tender, touching speech he has ever made.

— Acts 20: 7-17

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

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Ever since the silversmiths of Ephesus got on their high horses and kicked Paul out of town, he has been trotting around Macedonia. Now he is on his way back to Jerusalem. Along the way he has stopped at Miletus, thirty safe miles from Ephesus.

At his summons, leaders of the Ephesus church have come to say hail and farewell. Between the “Hi, there!” and the “So long!”, Paul talks to these dear friends in a personal and poignant way. It is a speech that brings tears to the eyes and a tissue to the nose.

He begins by reminding the group how intensely he worked among them. “From the first moment I arrived in Ephesus, I spent all my time in the service of the Lord, you know that. Sometimes it wasn’t all that easy, what with the plots of some Jews causing me grief and keeping me humble. Even so, never under any circumstances did I keep anything from you. Both publicly and privately, at all times, I told you everything I could think of that might help you.”

He lays his message on them again now. “I urged everybody — it didn’t matter whether they were Jews or Gentiles — to turn from sin and to believe in our Lord Jesus.”

Having affirmed his past purpose among these friends, Paul offers them now a heart full of his present feelings. "I am on my way to Jerusalem. I think that's where the Holy Spirit wants me to go. I don't really know what will happen to me there. I only know that in town after town I have sensed the Holy Spirit trying to tell me something. I will go to jail, and there is a lot of trouble in store for me, I do know this."

This is the first we have known about Paul's premonition about his own eventual imprisonment. It is the first of three foreboding insights — warnings, if you will — that he will receive before he reaches Jerusalem. Each one is clearer, more urgent than the last. Now, in a sentence totally revealing of the person he is, he tells his friends why he has not been afraid.

"My own life doesn't mean a thing to me," he says, "except to complete my mission, to tell others of the good news of the grace of God."

If these exquisite words haven't touched his friends, his reference to the future surely will.

"I have shared my faith with each and every one of you," he says, "but I know we will not ever see each other again."

Sharp gasps and muffled "No!"s must rise from his startled audience.

How deeply Paul cares is etched through every word: "I have not held back anything concerning the Kingdom of God. If any of you is lost, it won't be because I haven't tried."

Then, in tender admonition: "Keep a careful guard over yourselves, and over all the congregation. You are

the leaders the Holy Spirit has placed in charge of the flock. Be as shepherds over the church, for he calls it to himself with his own blood. I know that as soon as I am out of reach, false preachers will come among you like fierce wolves. They will have no mercy on the flock. The time will even come when someone from your own group will try to pull disciples away from you."

Unthinkable! But Paul has had to say it. Now he asks that these folks remember his love for them: "Watch, then and remember that for three years, day and night, I taught each one of you, and wept for each one of you." (Actually, Paul's stay among the Ephesians was a little over two years, but three years isn't a bad generalization.)

This outpouring of emotion culminates in warm blessing. "And now I put you in the care of God. His message of grace has power. It will sustain you. It will also give you the blessings he keeps for all those who are his."

To reassure his friends that he is motivated strictly by love of them and of God, Paul reminds them that he never asked anyone for money or for clothing. He worked with his own hands to provide for the needs of himself and his companions while in Ephesus.

"All I'm trying to say," he concludes, "is that we must work hard and always give support to those who are weaker than we are. Besides, remember what Jesus said: 'it is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

The quotation is fascinating, and all the more so because we do not find it in any of the gospels.

Paul's time with these good friends is nearly over. Together they all kneel in prayer. When they rise, his friends tearfully embrace Paul, and kiss him goodbye.

Some of Paul's letters indicate that he may, after all, have returned to Ephesus later. But at this moment, these dear friends believe that their parting from him is final, and a light is going from their lives.

— Acts 20: 18-38

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

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It's anchors aweigh for Paul again as he leaves Miletus and heads for Jerusalem. His premonition of danger there saddens him, but obviously does not deter him. (He may occasionally get on a soapbox, but he is not a deterred gent.)

Sailing along with Paul, Luke logs with great enthusiasm each stop along the way. He also mentions that their ship sails close enough to Cyprus to see the island, but passes it by to the south. We wonder — is this because Paul had had such a terrible quarrel with Barnabas, who now lives there? Or was Cyprus just not on the ship's itinerary?

They sail into the city of Tyre and the ship unloads its cargo. It also unloads Paul and his friends, this time for a week. There are no prior arrangements for staying over in this city. However, Paul and his friends look up some believers here, and are promptly invited to stay with them. Otherwise, it could have been a sort of flat Tyre experience.

The week is undoubtedly filled with warmth and preaching and a special kind of fellowship. But when it is time for Paul to get back on board ship, the believers

of Tyre speak with urgency: "Don't go!" The Holy Spirit has gotten through to them. They too sense danger for Paul in Jerusalem.

But Paul does not take his friends' concerned advice. "When our visit was over," Luke says with a kind of calm finality, "we left and went on our way."

However, they are not to leave Tyre without another touching farewell. As at Miletus, the good people of Tyre accompany Paul and Luke and the others to the waiting ship. Whole families have come to say goodbye. Even the children are brought for a last loving glimpse of this great man.

In a moment surely vibrant with emotion, everyone kneels on the beach for prayer. "Then," Luke says so very simply, "we said goodbye to each other. We went on board, and our friends went home." Surely some on that beach sat and watched, and perhaps wept a little, until the ship blended into the horizon.

For the voyagers, Ptolemais is the next stop. Here Paul and the others greet the believers but stay only one day. From here the ship sails on to Caesarea, where we once met Cornelius. Now we find an old friend, Philip, here, and Paul and the others stay with him for awhile. Philip, we recall, is one of the seven deacons chosen by the early church. Last time we saw Phil he was on the road to Gaza, baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch. The way Luke tells the story (Acts 8) Philip had some sort of strange experience there in which the Spirit mysteriously transported him to Ashdod and eventually to Caesarea.

Whatever the experience, it was not so ethereal as to prevent him from having done pretty well for himself in



the interim. He now has a wife and four unmarried daughters. The daughters all have the power of prophecy (which may explain why they are unmarried.) Luke doesn't tell us any of their prophecies. We're not even sure why he tells us they are unmarried, but it certainly lends a home-y authenticity to his story.

Suddenly, yet another old friend arrives at Philip's door. It is Agabus, the prophet. We last saw Agabus in Antioch, early in Paul's ministry. It was the prediction of famine by Agabus that motivated the church there to take up that first collection for the Jerusalem church.

Now 'Bus, whose predictions do not seem to run to cheerfulness, has yet another warning for Paul. Like any good prophet, Old Testament style, he may overdo the drama a bit. First he goes up to Paul and snatches his belt from him. (Given Paul's quick temper, he is lucky he doesn't get belted himself.) He then proceeds to tie his own hands and feet with Paul's belt.

"This," he declares, "is what the Holy Spirit says: 'The Jews in Jerusalem will tie the owner of this belt like this, and they will let the Gentiles deal with him.'"

So the Jews will have Paul arrested by the Romans! It is the most direct and most powerful of three warnings Paul has now received. First, his own intuition, then that of the fellowship at Tyre, and now Agabus.

Heavy sadness, even dread, fills the heart of Luke. "We begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem," he writes.

But for Paul the warnings are preparation for Jerusalem, not forbiddance. The pleading of his friends only burdens him more. "What are you doing?" he cries. "Your weeping is breaking my heart. I am ready to be tied up in Jerusalem.

I am even ready to die for Jesus.”

Luke’s anguish is apparent, too. “We could not convince him,” he says, “so we gave up.” Finally Luke and the others let Paul follow his own heart, with the prayer, “May the Lord’s will be done.”

It is to be an irrevocable, forward march for Paul now — to Jerusalem and to Rome, to confrontation with kings and with emperors, to prison and to a quiet victory for his Lord.

— Acts 21: 1-14

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## CHAPTER SIXTY

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The journey to Jerusalem continues. From Philip's house the party goes to the home of Mnason. Uh, what do you mean, not exactly a household word?

Mnason is a believer from the earliest days after the resurrection. As he is originally from Cyprus, he quite likely knows Barnabas, and quite possibly knows of the split between Barnabas and Saul. Still, when friends from Caesarea come knocking on his door with Paul and his party in tow, Mnason is gracious enough to take them in.

We are not really clear from Luke's narrative just where Mnason lives. Somewhere between Caesarea and Jerusalem? Or right in Jerusalem? It doesn't really matter. The fact that the visit is mentioned at all is enough to touch the story with Luke's special brand of real-ness.

Once in Jerusalem, Paul is welcomed warmly by the believers—at least at first. We can imagine the backslapping and bearhugging he receives.

Amid all the celebrating, Paul arranges to meet the next day with James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church. As we have already seen, James, the brother of Jesus, is now the head of the Jerusalem congregation. It's true the central activity of the church moved to Antioch

long ago because of persecution. But Paul knows the Jerusalem believers still deserve a certain amount of formal respect.

All the church elders come to the meeting, eager to hear how things are going for their Lord, out there beyond their city. Paul gives a talk which could be entitled, "How I Spent My Third Missionary Tour."

It's likely that this is the time Paul presents the gifts of money he has collected from the Gentile churches and carried with him for so long. (Though Luke doesn't mention the presentation here, we learn in Acts 24 that the gift is one reason Paul returned to Jerusalem.)

The Jewish Christian congregation in Jerusalem listens to Paul and thanks God for his success among the Gentiles.

However, this same congregation has had a real hassle because of "fall-out" from Paul's work, and the time has come for him to be made aware of it. They tell him straight out.

"Paul, we praise the Lord for the Gentile converts, but there are thousands and thousands of Jews who have also become believers in Christ. They are still good Jews totally devoted to the law."

(Uh-huh. The same old Jew vs. Gentile problem rears its head.)

"The rumor is that you've been telling the Jews who live in Gentile countries to toss out the Law of Moses. We hear that you've been telling them not to circumcise their children, and not to follow any Jewish customs."

(Well—come on now, folks. Paul does say that Gentiles don't have to practice Jewish customs—but he never says that Jews shouldn't.)

"Now there's no way we're going to be able to keep your arrival here in Jerusalem a secret."

(True. It would be a little like doing a Jimmy Durante act: "Elephant? What elephant?")

"Tell you what we want you to do. There are four men here who have taken a Nazirite vow."

(As Paul did at Cenchrae.)

"Why don't you go with them to the Temple, join in the ceremony of purification, even pay their expenses so they can shave their heads?"

(It was not an uncommon gesture for the haves to pay the expenses of the have nots who wanted to go through a purification ritual. And the vow was not distasteful to Paul. The last time he arrived in Jerusalem he was himself sporting a Yul Brynner hairdo.)

"If you'll do this, then everyone will know the rumors are not true, and that you live according to the law of Moses."

(This seems like a direct contradiction to Paul's fervent conviction that Jesus frees us from the law, and that justification is by faith alone, not in the doing of deeds. However, Paul also believes he should live as a Jew, for the sake of Jews, if that will help his Jewish friends find Christ as the living Lord. (I Cor. 9:20).)

"By the way," the Jerusalem elders continue, "we've sent a letter to the Gentiles telling them they don't have to become Jews before becoming Christians, so long as they observe certain rules about sacrificial foods, and keep themselves morally on the up and up."

(Well, sure, Paul knows that. He helped deliver the letter from Jerusalem to Antioch. James and his flock

certainly know he did, too. Either they want to remind Paul that even the Gentiles have respect for Judaism, or writer Luke thought he'd throw that in just to keep the record straight.)

Because Paul wants to reassure his Jewish-friends-turned-Christian, he does as the Jerusalem congregation asks him to do. He goes with the four men to the Temple for the ceremony of purification.

It is to be his last free act.

— Acts 21: 15-26

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

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Members of the Jerusalem congregation were apparently not quite 100% sure of Paul. Would he put them down for their Jewish heritage? No, of course not. Should he be asked to prove that? Well, ah, not such a bad idea.

So it is that the Jerusalem congregation asked Paul to go through an ancient Jewish ritual, that of purification. Jerusalem was a congregation made up almost exclusively of Jews who happen to believe Christ to be the fulfillment of their faith. To go through the ceremony of purification was to be a way for Paul to reassure them he had not forgotten his Jewish roots.

Paul agrees to do so, but he can't be too terribly happy about the idea. He has just returned from his third mission to the Gentiles. Is he now to say, "Oh, yeah, all you non-Jews out there, you gotta be Jewish to believe in the Jewish Messiah"? No way. He has spent years and traveled miles to say the exact opposite. But Paul will go to any corner to serve this Jesus who lives. If identifying again with Jewish ways will make Jewish Christians happy — well, why not? Dutifully, he goes to the Temple with four men who are also to go through the seven-day ceremony.

Everything goes well until the week draws to a close.

Then along come some Jews who are visiting Jerusalem from around Ephesus. When they see Paul in the Temple, they quickly accuse him of committing a deed so dastardly it is punishable by death: they say he has brought a Gentile into the Temple. Maybe it is a natural assumption. Previously they had seen Paul in the city with Trophimus, who is among the seven men who had come with Paul from Ephesus. Now these visiting Ephesians assume Trophimus, whom they surely know personally to be a Gentile Greek, is also in the Temple with Paul.

We have already seen that whatever else Ephesus may or may not produce, it does grow great rioters. Suddenly as a tornado, the city of Jerusalem is swirled into a screaming uproar. Maybe these Ephesian Jews are sincerely angered, or maybe they are sincerely opportunists. At any rate, they are sincerely loud.

"Help!" they shout, grabbing Paul. "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who goes around preaching against the Temple and all it stands for! Now he has defiled it! He has brought Gentiles into the Temple!"

Instantly, Jerusalem becomes a convention of chickens with their heads cut off. Confusion flashes through the city. A river of clamoring people bursts upon the Temple. Paul is wishboned out of the grip of his accusers and dragged, pulled, drawn out of the Temple. Guards quickly shut the Temple doors.

While the mob is doing its best to beat Paul to death, someone runs to the commander of Roman troops stationed in another part of the Temple area. Immediately upon hearing of the disturbance, the commander orders some officers and soldiers to rush into the crowd with him.



It has a sobering effect on the hysteria. Even those pounding on Paul stop their frantic activity.

By this time, Paul is surely dazed. The captain orders his arrest and commands that he be placed in two chains, probably linked to two guards, one on each side. No one is going to pull him away this time.

The commander turns to the crowd. "Now then — who is this man? What has he done?"

Headless chicken time again. The confusion is so turbulent that the commander can get no idea of what has happened. Finally, he barks an order to his men.

"Take this man up the stairs to my office. We'll sort things out there."

Like a stalking animal, the mob pounces when its victim moves. Paul gets only as far as the stairs before the crowd rushes in again screaming, "Kill him! Kill him!"

The soldiers protecting Paul think very fast. They hoist him up bodily and carry him in their arms up the stairs to the military post. They put him down safely at the top of the stairs and prepare to take him inside. But Paul thinks fast too. He speaks to the commander in the commander's native Greek. "May I say something to you?"

The captain seems astounded. "You speak Greek?" Until now he has assumed Paul to be a known revolutionary of the day. "Then you aren't the guy from Egypt who recently tried to start a revolution? You're not the man who led 4000 armed terrorists out into the desert?"

"I am a Jew," Paul says simply. "I was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, a city of some importance. Please, permit me to speak to the people."

Once in Philippi Paul used his Roman citizenship to

get himself out of a jam (Acts 16:37.) Now he tries to use his Jewish heritage for the same reason. "Let me speak to these Jews as a Jew," he is saying. The commander, perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps because he thinks it is his best shot at returning the city to order, gives his consent.

Paul motions for quiet, and begins a moving speech of defense.

— Acts 21: 26-40

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

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Paul has been bobbed around like a cork in a sea of angry Jews, and has been rescued by Roman soldiers. He turns now to the Roman commander and asks permission to speak to the crowd. The commander apparently decides things can't get much worse anyway, so he might as well let Paul have a go at calming the mob. Paul signals for quiet and expects to get it. The people obey that expectation. When the roar fades down, and silence comes in, Paul speaks.

"You who are as brothers and fathers to me!" (Good start — claim kinship.) "Listen to me! Let me tell my story!" (He's got 'em. They're suddenly all ears, wanting to hear what this man has to say to them in their own language.)

"I am a Jew too. Though I was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, I was brought up right here in Jerusalem." (Some in the crowd have surely already recognized this fact, though probably this tense moment is not the time for them to say so.)

"I was a student of Gamaliel." (That should be worth a lot of points.) Luke has already told us that Gamaliel was a teacher of the law, and a highly respected man. (Acts 5:34.)

"I was trained to observe the law in the strictest way."  
(What more could this crowd ask for?)

"I was just as dedicated to God as all of you are right now. I was among the first to persecute followers of this Jesus. I threw men and women into prison for their beliefs. You can check with the high priest and the Sanhedrin if you don't believe me. I even talked the high priest into giving me letters of introduction to take to the Jews in Damascus." (It was undoubtedly a former high priest, but Paul's point is not lost.)

"I intended to go to Damascus to find believers and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains." (He's got to convince these fanatics that he was once even more fanatic than they, so that they might tolerate his conversion story.)

"It was about midday when I was nearing Damascus." This is the first time we have known what time of day his conversion occurred. It is one way this re-telling of the experience here in Acts 22 differs a little from the account in Acts 9.

"Suddenly, a tremendous brightness flashed all around me, and jolted me to the ground. I could hear a voice crying, 'Saul, Saul! Why are you doing these terrible things to me?'"

"I cried out, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the answer came, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth that you persecute.'"

Almost parenthetically here, Paul notes, "The men with me saw the bright light, but they didn't hear the voice." In the earlier version of the story, Luke tells it in reverse — Paul's companions hear the voice, but don't see anything.

Paul continues, "I finally called out, 'What shall I do,

Lord?’ He told me to get up off my posterior and to get on into Damascus, where he would tell me what his plan was. However, that great brightness had blinded me. My friends had to take me by the hand and lead me into the city.”

“When we got to Damascus, Ananias was there. Ananias is a deeply religious man. Everyone looks up to him. He simply commanded me to see again — and I did, at that very moment! He told me God had chosen me to know God’s will, and to see him and hear him as I had. He also told me, ‘You will be a witness to tell everyone what you have seen and heard.’” (Since this whole scene is the result of the Jerusalem Jews’ aversion to Paul’s hobnobbing with Gentiles, we wonder if he may have put a little extra emphasis on the word “everyone.”)

“Then,” he continues, “he urged me not to wait one minute longer. I was to go get baptized and have my sins washed away by calling on the name of Jesus.”

Thus, charged with defiling the Temple, Paul has chosen to begin his defense by reviewing both his Jewish heritage and his conversion moment. He stands before this raging mob and speaks with a touching earnestness. So far the crowd has listened quietly, but it is the quiet before the cataclysm. Paul is about to make a nearly fatal mistake.

— Acts 22: 1-16



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

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Trial by out-of-control mob — that's the position Paul has once more gotten himself into. He has undertaken a ritual in the Temple to reassure Jerusalem Jews that he does not wish to undercut them. In the process, he is spotted by some visiting Ephesians. They jump to the conclusion that Paul has Trophimus, a Gentile, with him in the Temple. "Defilement!" they yell.

To defile the Temple by bringing a Gentile into it is one heck of a no-no. Paul is in no way guilty of being that sacrilegious — nor that stupid. But try to tell that to a roaring mob. However, that is exactly what Paul is trying to do. So far the mob has listened while he speaks of his early fierce loyalty to Judaism, his sudden "introduction" to Christ on the road to Damascus, and his baptism into the faith.

Now he brings the story back to this very spot, the Temple. "I came back to Jerusalem," he says, "and I had a vision while praying in the Temple." (This is the first time writer Luke has told us of this vision, so we don't know precisely which visit back to Jerusalem Paul refers to.)

"In the vision the Lord said to me, 'Get out of town — fast. The people here aren't going to listen to you preach

about me.”

Paul always uses logic to win an argument. Apparently he thought he'd try it with the Lord at the time of this vision. He tells the mob, "In effect, I said to the Lord, 'But the people should understand. They know what a good Jew I was. They know I went to the synagogue and arrested people who believed in you and that I had them beaten. They know that when Stephen was murdered I just stood there, giving my approval and even guarding the cloaks of his killers.'"

Was the Lord impressed with this magnificent logic? Apparently not. Paul tells the crowd the Lord said to him, "Go! I plan for you to travel into the Gentile nations."

If the mob is at all able to discern the (surely unintentional) humor of Paul trying to out-logic the Lord, it is all blown away with that one word, "Gentile." Immediately there are screeches, "Kill him! A man like this does not deserve to live!"

In frenzy, the rioters scoop up handfuls of dust and throw them into the air. Some violently swing their cloaks around — anything to create as much turmoil as possible. All told, it is an ugly and violent scene.

Paul is hustled into the fort for his own protection. However, it seems to be a case of out of the flying sand and into the mire. The Roman commander doesn't have a clue as to what has happened here, and so he does the only thing he can think of — he orders his men to beat the truth out of Paul with a whip.

We can just about see Paul's mind whirring while they are tying him up. Finally he turns to an officer and pointedly asks, "Is it lawful for you to whip a Roman citizen



who hasn't even been tried?"

If ever there were a rhetorical question that the asker knows the answer to, that's it. In Philippi Paul thought to raise the question too late, after he'd already been beaten by the officials. This time he gets it right.

The officer goes right to the commander. "What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!" As we have seen, it is a serious offense to beat a Roman citizen without trial. The commander realizes he'd better check this one out.

"Tell me," he says to Paul, with what seems studied casualness. "Are you indeed a Roman citizen?"

"Yes."

"Me, too," the commander replies. "I had to pay a large sum to become a citizen." Apparently there was an official fee for obtaining citizenship. It is very hard to tell whether the commander is bragging or complaining.

"But I am a citizen by birth," Paul responds. This may mean Paul's father bought citizenship for himself or was granted it for some special service. Shocked by Paul's declaration, the men who were to "examine" him withdraw. The commander himself is afraid.

Thus, Paul escapes the whip this time. We are not sure, however, exactly where he is lodged for the night. Undoubtedly in some jail cell, for he still has chains on the next day.

The commander and the mob are thus the first "court" to "try" Paul for this charge of defiling the Temple. Tomorrow he will face a more formal court, the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council.



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

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The commander now in charge of Paul is a persistent little dude. He has tried to find out from the Jerusalem mob what the flap-up is all about, but the mob is a roaring cyclone. He has allowed Paul to talk to the crowd, but the crowd goes vicious before the tribune can figure out what's happening. He even thinks he'll try a little torture on Paul, but backs off when he learns of Paul's Roman citizenship.

The commander may be persistent — but he doesn't seem too bright. It doesn't seem to occur to him to simply ask Paul, "What's the problem here?" Still scratching his head, he orders the chief priests and the whole Council to meet with him the next day. "Orders" may be a stronger word than writer Luke meant to use, as it appears the Roman commander of the local troops would not have had that kind of authority. At any rate, he must have said to the ecclesiastical dignitaries, "Y'all come!" because they all came.

At some point in the proceedings that follow, Paul is made to stand before them. "Brothers!" Paul insists, "My conscience is clear! I have used my life for God right up to this moment!"

Whap! That's all he has time to say before he gets bashed right in the mouth. The high priest, whose name is Ananias, has given the signal for someone standing near Paul to sock him right in the kisser. Surely there are groans of protest from some of the Council members. It dwindles to a shocked silence. Then with lips that are undoubtedly numb, or even bleeding, Paul flares out at Ananias: "You white-washed wall! God himself will beat you! How dare you sit there and judge me by the law, and yet break the law yourself by ordering them to beat me!"

Call anyone a whitewashed wall today, and they would be more puzzled than insulted. But apparently in Paul's day it is an effective insult. The men standing near Paul gasp, "You are insulting God's high priest!"

Quickly Paul speaks, "I didn't know, brothers, that he was the high priest. I know the scriptures say, "You must not speak evil of the ruler of your people." (Ex. 22: 28).

That may be more a-Paul-ology than apology. There does seem to be a touch of subtle irony in there somewhere. Paul would surely know who the high priest is. Is it possible that "I didn't know he was high priest" translates "I couldn't have guessed it by his actions"?

This is the third Ananias we have met in Luke's story. The first, in Acts 5, died, as did his wife Sapphira, after failing to reveal the truth about their profit from the sale of some property. The second, in Acts 9, was sent by the Lord to restore Paul's eyesight after his conversion. Now, in Acts 23, there is this third Ananias, a high priest with a reputation for dishonesty and cruelty.

Paul needs some allies. It doesn't appear that the Jerusalem church gives him much support, or if it does,

Luke does not record it. Paul, however, improvises a scheme of his own. Even in this moment of crisis, he recognizes that some Council members are Sadducees, and some Pharisees. We have already seen that the Pharisees believe in life after death and in angels, spirits and the like. The Sadducees do not. Both groups are very tense about it all.

"My brothers!" Paul calls out. "I am a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees. The real reason I am on trial for my life is that I hope for the resurrection of the dead!" We can almost see Paul's eyes roll heavenward in angelic innocence of the disturbance this will cause.

The Sadducees take the bait and begin sniping at the Pharisees. Soon everyone tries to out-shout everyone else. The august Sanhedrin has been very neatly reduced to a quarreling sideshow. As the turmoil grows, some of the Pharisees can be heard yelling, "We find nothing wrong with this man. Maybe a spirit or an angel really did speak to him!"

The commotion verges on violence. The commander thinks Paul is going to get creamed, so he orders his troops to hustle him out of there and back into the fort.

Paul has now faced a raging and mindless mob one day and the next day seen the spectacle of the great Sanhedrin in total disintegration. The following evening, he must feel almost submerged in the contrasting quiet as he waits, probably alone, in a cell. Through that silence, suddenly, he knows the immediate presence of his Lord.

"Don't be discouraged!" the Lord comforts him. "You have served me well here in Jerusalem, and you must also go to Rome to be my spokesman."

So Paul's longing to go to Rome (Acts 19:21) will be satisfied! He will not, however, go in glory. He will go in chains.

— Acts 22: 30 – 23: 1-11

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## CHAPTER SIXTY

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From the make-believe diary of a for-real Roman commander, one Claudius Lysias:

**Entry 1:** Gad! What a blunder I pulled the other day! I ordered the man Paul to be beaten! It seemed to me the whole city of Jerusalem was rioting. I figured the best way to get to the bottom of it all was to order the beating. Bad move! How'd I know he was a Roman citizen? Fortunately, he informed us before we laid a hand on him. How would that have looked on my record?

Then I called a meeting of the Council and I'll be danged if that old high priest Ananias didn't order Paul to be smashed in the mouth. Jews just don't seem to have any respect at all for Roman citizenship!

Then the next thing I know, Paul is cleverly baiting the Council members. So they start quarreling among themselves like snarling animals. I figured I'd better pull Paul out of there and get him into a nice, safe jail.

But there he sits. I wonder what to do with him now?

**Entry 2:** Well, tonight this whole hassle will be out of my hands — and so will Paul. Tonight I send him off to Caesarea, to Governor Felix. If I don't, the Jews will kill him. Forty of them — forty! — are so determined to assassinate

him they have vowed not to eat or drink until they've succeeded. The hungrier they get, the harder they'll try.

With forty people in on the plot, it's strange my soldiers didn't get wind of it. Fortunately for Paul, his sister and her family live here in Jerusalem, and someone told Paul's young nephew.

The lad came running to the fort this morning to tell Paul. "Take this young man to the commander," Paul urged one of my officers. "He has something to tell the tribune."

Of course the officer brought him to me. The nephew looked so intense. Was it just the family resemblance to his uncle? I didn't think so. I took him by the arm, and led him off by himself where we could talk privately. He spilled it all out like a waterfall:

"The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul to the Council tomorrow. They'll use the pretense that they want to find out more about him. Don't do it! More than forty of them will be waiting to attack him. They have all promised not to eat or drink until they kill him. They will do it! All they need is for you to say yes to their request!"

This young man must be very fond of his uncle Paul to take the risk of telling me. If the Jews ever find out, there just might be one less nephew in Jerusalem. For that reason, and to insure the success of my next move, I advised him not to tell anyone that he told me. I dismissed him then, and immediately began arrangements to get Paul out of Jerusalem tonight and on his way to Governor Felix. Then I sat down to write an explanation to the governor:

"To his excellency, the governor Felix: Greetings! This man was about to be killed by rioting Jews. When I discovered he is a Roman citizen, I went in with my troops



and rescued him. Later, to find out what they have against him, I took him before their own Council. As far as I'm concerned, he hasn't done anything to be put to death by Roman law, or even to be put into prison. The Jews' accusations against him have only to do with their own law. However, I have received information of a plot to assassinate him, so I'm sending him to you. His accusers will have to make their charges against him before you. Farewell. Claudius Lysias."

I would have been a fool to say that I nearly had Paul beaten, so I threw in the part about his Roman citizenship in the context of the rescue. Clever, if I do say so myself.

**Entry 3:** A short while ago, at 9:00 o'clock, while most of Jerusalem slept, I watched a veritable military parade usher Paul out of town. On my orders there were two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and 200 spearmen. The dust has hardly settled, and hoof-beats still echo through the night. There are those who will criticize me for such a show of force, but, after all, there are forty assassins out there somewhere. Obviously, it would be wrong for Paul to die, but there is yet another angle I must consider: What if I were accused of taking a bribe to allow Paul's death?

**Entry 4:** Word from Antipatris! The foot soldiers sent with Paul yesterday returned from there today. They report Paul and his entourage got that far safely, about two-thirds of the way.

I cannot help thinking — somewhere in this city of Jerusalem tonight are forty Jews who are probably sneaking into forty pantries, and looking very sheepish.



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

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“Ex-Slave Becomes Governor of Judea and Samaria.”

Back in A.D. 52 that would have been a pretty good headline. Antonius Felix had indeed been a slave in times past — but not in the service of just any old household: he had belonged to the staff of the emperor’s mother.

The emperor, Claudius, took a liking to him — enough to elevate him to the position of governor when the moment was right. It was a first. Such choice jobs were not usually given to freedmen.

Maybe it wasn’t all luck. Felix seems to have had a knack for dealing himself a pretty good hand. He had, for instance, married Drusilla, daughter of King Herod Agrippa I. Never hurts your social standing any to have a princess in the family.

Ensnconced in Caesarea, Felix looks up one day to see a troop of horsemen come galloping into town. They pull up in front of him, hand him a letter from the Roman commander Lysias, and formally turn a prisoner over to him. The prisoner, of course, is Paul and we already know the contents of Lysias’ letter to governor Felix.

The governor reads the letter and shoots one question to Paul: “Where are you from?”

"I am from Cilicia." (Paul's hometown Tarsus is in the province of Cilicia.)

Apparently that confirms for Felix that he has the jurisdictional right to try Paul. But he is certainly in no hurry. "When your accusers come, then we'll hear what you have to say. Meantime, you'll remain my prisoner. You'll be kept in the praetorium."

The praetorium, in case there is any question, is not an auditorium where the pious go to prae. In Paul's day the praetorium was the headquarters of the Roman governor. Earlier, it had been the home of Herod the Great. Now, for two whole years, it is to be Paul's home, and his prison.

Not that his enemies don't try to bring him to trial right away. It takes them only five days to locate him, select a delegation, obtain a lawyer, and arrive at the governor's doorstep.

The brawl that started all this in Jerusalem may have been initiated by rabble rousers — but the prosecuting delegation that has arrived in Caesarea is headed by none other than the high priest himself, old Sock-Your-Prisoner-in-the-Kisser, Ananias. Ananias apparently doesn't get to say much at the hearing, however. Paul's never-miss-a-bet enemies back home in Jerusalem have sent along an attorney to present the case against him. Counselor's name is Tertullus. Whatever the name really means, it ought to translate "slick operator."

Tertullus' flattery to the governor opens his case against Paul. "Your excellency, because of you we have enjoyed a great peace, and through your far-sightedness we are enjoying new reforms. We are forever grateful." (The truth

is, ancient historians agree, Felix was cruel and lustful and repressive.)

Tertullus slithers on. "I don't want to keep you too long, but I beg you to hear us briefly." As usual, the charge against Paul seems practically non-substantive. "This guy is a pest. He goes around the world stirring up trouble among the Jews. He is a ringleader of the Nazarenes." ("Nazarenes" was a term for Christians, probably derived from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.)

Tertullus' use of the word "ringleader" makes Christians seem about on a par with the family of the Godfather. He continues the charge against Paul, saying that Paul tried to profane the Temple, but was stopped, of course, when those models of angelic behavior, the visiting Ephesians, spotted him.

Some versions of Acts have Tertullus explaining, "We were going to try Paul ourselves, but Commander Lysias came and yanked him away from us, insisting we come to you."

Tertullus concludes his address by suggesting to Felix, "Question Paul yourself and find out the truth."

Naturally, the rest of the delegation supports everything Terty has said.

Finally, when the prosecution has stopped rambling on, it is Paul's turn to tell his side of the story. Felix motions for him to do so.

It is a spirited, specific, articulate defense that Paul gives.

— Acts 23: 32 – 24: 10



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

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Remarkable! After almost literally tearing Paul apart in the Temple, after watching him get led off in chains, after plotting with relish to murder him, and to go without food (with or without relish) if their plot should fail — after all of this, this is the best his accusers can come up with in court: “He’s a pest!”

They stand before Governor Felix and sputter out their charge against Paul. They say he starts riots a lot. They repeat their totally untrue accusation that he tried to defile the Temple.

The charges are vague, ambiguous and uncertain. For Paul, defending himself against them must be like grappling with shadows. He does it, however, systematically and with vigor.

As did prosecutor Tertullus, Paul opens his speech with a compliment to Felix. “I have confidence in you as a judge. I know you have administered justice over this nation for years.” (After Tertullus’ flattery, Paul’s statement is merely polite.)

He continues his defense. “It was only twelve days ago that I went up to Jerusalem. Check it out for yourself. I went there to worship. The Jews did not find me arguing

with anyone in the Temple. And they did not find me revving up the crowds — not in the Temple, not in the synagogues, not anywhere else. They cannot bring you a shred of evidence to prove their accusations against me.” It is a strong statement, for Paul knows what he’s talking about.

Having denied certain allegations, he now admits to certain others. “This much is true — I do follow the new way of worshipping God, the way these Jews say is just a sect. But even so, I still believe all that is in the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets. My hope in God is the same as that of these Jews — that everyone, whether good or bad, will rise from death.”

Like a roll of kettle drums, the resurrection theme comes reverberating back into all that Paul speaks. Once more he tells us how it affects his life. “Therefore, I do my very best to keep a clear conscience before God and man.”

He now repeats the reasons he had gone to Jerusalem in the first place:

“I had been away for several years. I came back for two reasons. I wanted to bring my friends some money I had collected for them in my travels. And I wanted to offer sacrifices in the Temple. This is what I was doing when these non-believing Jews found me there. I had just completed the ceremony of purification. There was no crowd. There was no disorder. But some Jews from Ephesus saw me there. If they have anything against me, they are the ones who should come before you and make the charge. Otherwise, these men present should specify what crime they found me guilty of before the Council. The only thing



I did that is open to criticism: I shouted to the Sanhedrin, 'The real issue here is that I believe in the resurrection of the dead!'"

Now in retrospect, Paul's outburst in the Council seems to bother him a little. Maybe the fact that the Sanhedrin responded by completely falling apart caught him by surprise. He knew he was precipitating an argument — but a three-ring circus?

For now, Governor Felix has heard enough. He apparently doesn't feel like dealing with any of this at the moment. (Besides, writer Luke tells us in Acts 24:22 that Felix already knows a lot about Christianity. He apparently doesn't have the need to question Paul publicly for background information.)

"I'm not going to decide your case now," he tells Paul. "When Commander Lysias arrives, we'll do so then."

He turns to the officer in charge of Paul. "Keep this man under guard. He is, however, to be permitted free access to his friends."

Well, Lysias, by design or circumstance, never gets to Caesarea. Paul must stay under the thumb of Felix for two years.

During that time, we'll catch a glimpse of why the governor was regarded by ancient historians as Felix the Fink.

— Acts 24: 10-23



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

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“He exercised the functions of a prince with the disposition of a slave.” So says the ancient historian Tacitus of Governor Felix. In addition to the obvious reference to Felix’s background, Tacitus is also saying, “He ain’t got no class.”

It was true. Felix was cruel and corrupt and had a penchant for playing hanky-pank with other men’s wives. At least he managed to persuade King Herod’s daughter Drusilla to leave her first husband and marry him.

For all of that, writer Luke doesn’t say much about Felix’s bad-guy reputation. He does, however, imply a lot. He tells us, for instance, that during the two years Felix detains Paul without trial, the governor has some strange interviews with Paul: Felix the cat plays with the prisoner mouse.

It’s possible Drusilla requests the first conversation with Paul. As a Jew she would have had interest in the Christian way. (Some say it was she who gave Felix a prior knowledge of Christianity.)

So Felix, with Drusilla at his side, sends for Paul privately. Is there a chance that at that moment the Roman

governor and his Jewish wife might have been converted to Christianity? We'll never know. Paul, with typical intensity about the faith, scared the socks off them.

Paul gets all keyed up and involved in a discussion about goodness and self-control, and follows that with a description of the coming Day of Judgment. However, Felix's social injustices and marital entanglements have put him in no mood to hear about a judgment day.

He dismisses Paul abruptly. "Don't call me, I'll call you." Surprisingly, he does call on Paul again — often. But not so surprisingly when we learn why. It is no longer to learn of the faith. It is to accept a bribe, should it be so offered. Felix was hoping Paul would pay money to gain release. After two years, however, Felix's palm is still uncrossed. In fact, his whole life fortune has changed. Claudius, his benefactor, is no longer on the emperor's throne. Instead there is Nero.

The new emperor apparently has heard many complaints from the Jews about Felix's activities. This displeases him very much, so Nero burns while Felix fiddles around.

It wasn't long before Nero decides to kick Felix in the governorship and replace him with someone else, namely Porcius Festus.

This, of course, would have been a natural time to release Paul, if Felix had any mind to do so. The incident at Jerusalem was two years old, and the new governor would have no personal interest in the case.

But Felix is smart enough, and cruel enough, to use Paul for his own purposes: he figures that maybe the Jews he has treated so badly won't be so mad at him if he left Paul in prison. Or maybe, as one translation seems to

suggest, it is his Jewish wife Drusilla who won't be so mad at him.

Whoever it is that Felix is trying to please, for Paul, being kept in prison turns out to be the best decision that could have been made.

As we shall see, his dream of preaching in Rome has just moved one step closer.

— Acts 24: 24-27



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## CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

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### A MINI-PLAY IN TWO ACTS

The characters:

Paul, who has now been a prisoner in Caesarea for two years.

The new governor, Porcius Festus.

Chief Priests and Disgruntled Jews, surely including some of the forty who once said they'd never eat again until they had done Paul in. (They should be easy to recognize — they should either be very skinny or have an embarrassed look on their faces.)

### ACT ONE

The setting is Jerusalem. The time is three days after Porcius Festus is named governor to succeed the ousted Felix. The Chief Priests and Disgruntled Jews are speaking to Festus.

C.P. & D.J. #1: Governor, we know you'll want to do the right thing.

Murmurs from the others: Yes, sir. We're sure of that.

C.P. & D.J. #2: You will, of course, want to please the Jewish population. We know you'll want to avoid any

mistakes made by Felix.

FESTUS (Is there a touch of slyness in his voice?): I understand your good wishes for me, gentlemen. Now, what can I do for you?

C.P. & D.J. #1: There is one favor.

C.P. & D.J. #2: It is in regard to the man Paul, under guard in Caesarea these two years.

C.P. & D.J. #3: Would you be so kind as to have him transferred back here to Jerusalem?

C.P. & D.J. #4: The better for us to present our case.

C.P. & D.J. #5 (In an aside:) The better for us to ambush him on the road!

FESTUS: Sorry, gentlemen! I'll be going back to Caesarea soon. Since that's where Paul is, it seems to me we ought to leave him there for the time being. If you want to accuse the man, if you think he has done something wrong, why don't you send a delegation of officers to Caesarea? I'll hear them properly there.

Curtain falls as Chief Priests and Disgruntled Jews register disappointment.

## ACT TWO

The setting is Caesarea. The time is eight or ten days later. The scene is the tribunal, or court of judgment.

FESTUS: We're ready for the prisoner Paul. Bring him in, please. (Under his breath:) I'm governor less than two weeks, back in Caesarea only one day, and already I've brought this man to trial. Felix kept him here two whole years. Score one for me with the Jews!



ENTER PAUL: He stands before Festus, flanked by guards. Immediately he is surrounded by the Jews who came from Jerusalem to accuse him. There is a lot of excited calling out of flimsy charges. When the accusers can think of nothing else to say, Paul addresses Festus.

PAUL: Sir, I have broken no law of the Jews. I have not sinned against the Temple. I have brought no disgrace to the Roman emperor.

FESTUS (to Paul): Are you willing to go back to Jerusalem and have me try you there on the charges your accusers make? (To himself:) That ought to do it! The Jews'll love that!

PAUL: No way! I should be tried exactly where I am standing—in a court of judgment authorized by Caesar himself.

(Groans from the accusers.)

PAUL: Come on, now, you know very well I have done no harm to the Jews. If I thought I'd broken the law and done anything to deserve the death penalty, I would not try to escape it. But there is not one speck of truth in their charges. No one has the right to hand me over to these Jews just to do them a favor! I appeal to the Emperor in Rome!

There is moment of expectant silence while Festus walks over to his advisors, and whispers with them for awhile. He returns to his place and addresses Paul.

FESTUS: You have appealed to the Emperor. To the Emperor you shall go!

Curtain falls as Chief Priests and Disgruntled Jews register disappointment — again.

— Acts 25: 1-12

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## CHAPTER SEVENTY

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“You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you shall go!” So says Governor Festus to Paul.

Obviously, Paul doesn’t appeal much to Festus. The governor tried to send him back to Jerusalem. There he would have been restored to Jewish jurisdiction (from his present Roman jurisdiction). It would have meant death to Paul for sure. But Paul has an ace up his sleeve. He demands a hearing before the emperor, and by law it must be granted.

Before Festus takes action, however, some royal visitors arrive. They have come to pay the new guy a courtesy visit. They are King Herod Agrippa and Bernice.

This Herod is the son of the Herod who had a little trouble with worms and died in Acts 12:23. This younger Herod is not ruler over territory which Festus governs, but by title he is considered head of the Jews. He is an important man for Festus to impress.

Bernice, it must be said, is not Agrippa’s wife. She is his sister. His subjects are scandalized because he has no wife — to speak of.

An interesting sidelight: Herod and Bernice are also brother and sister to Drusilla, wife of the former governor, Felix.

Festus wines and dines the royal couple for several days. When he tells them about Paul, he certainly tells an entertaining version of the story. He make himself look as pure as a newborn saint.

"I have a man here that was left in custody by Felix," he begins. (Little dig at his predecessor there.) "When I went to Jerusalem a lot of Jews made a lot of accusations against Paul. Actually, they wanted me to condemn him. But I told them Romans are not in the habit of surrendering any man accused of a crime until he has had a chance to meet his accusers face to face. He must first have a chance to defend himself against the charges." (See how virtuous the Roman law?)

"When the accusing Jews came here to Caesarea, I wasted no time." (Do notice the efficiency.) "The very next day I sat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought in. His accusers surprised me. They did not charge him with any of the terrible crimes I had expected they would. Their only gripe is that he thinks a certain man named Jesus is alive, and they know him to be dead. It's just a religious quarrel. Because I don't feel qualified to handle it, I asked Paul if he would be willing to be tried in Jerusalem." (How modest — "I don't feel qualified." It certainly sounds better than, "I wanted to please the Jews by sending the guy back to Jerusalem.")

Festus continues, "However, Paul was very stubborn. He will not go to Jerusalem. He will go to Rome. He insists upon his right to be tried before Caesar."

Herod Agrippa listens to the story and gets caught up in it.

"I want to hear this man for myself," he states.

“You will hear him tomorrow,” Festus promises.

Apparently it doesn’t take much to turn on royal pomp and circumstance. Agrippa and Bernice arrive at the tribunal the next day in procession with military chiefs and city officials. Clearly, this tete-a-tete with Paul has become something of a state occasion.

Upon the order of Festus, the prisoner is brought in.

“You see before you,” Festus announces to all, “the man whom some Jews here and in Jerusalem want to see dead. But I can’t find anything he’s done that is punishable by death. I have decided to send him to Rome. He himself has appealed to the emperor. The problem is, I don’t really have anything very definite to tell the emperor. Therefore I bring him before you important people — especially before you, King Agrippa. After you question him, maybe I’ll have something concrete to charge him with. It does seem a little ridiculous to send a prisoner all the way to the emperor in Rome without indicating the charges against him.” (Very good, Festus.)

When Festus has said his piece, Agrippa gives Paul permission to speak. Paul’s speech here is the last major speech in the Book of Acts, and some scholars believe it to be Paul’s most beautifully composed defense.

— Acts 25: 13 – 26: 1



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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

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Surely Paul deserves entry in the Guinness Book of Records — for giving the most number of speeches that are violently interrupted. Flying fists and howling hysterics have punctuated most of his speaking efforts.

Now, however, he has a quieter opportunity. King Agrippa, in Caesarea paying his respects to the new governor, Festus, expresses interest in Paul's case: he wants to hear the story from Paul himself.

This represents the fifth "court" Paul stands before since his arrest in the Temple. First there was the arresting Tribune at the Temple in Jerusalem — but Paul's speech there was drowned out by the mob's frenzy. Then there was the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Unbelievably, that dignified body fell to quarreling violently within itself. Next, Paul was hustled off to Caesarea and Governor Felix. There he has to contend with accusers who lie like a rug. And finally, before Governor Festus, Paul was surrounded by fanatic accusers who would not let their hokey accusations drop, even after two whole years.

Now Paul has a chance to tell his story to King Agrippa, with no rioters present, no accusers, no threats of violence to himself. However, this hearing before Agrippa is some-

what parenthetical. It is not a required step in the legal process of Paul's appeal to Caesar. Actually, Agrippa has no jurisdiction at all over Paul's case. Rather, both as a courtesy and as an expedient, Festus has called Agrippa in as a consultant.

Frankly, Governor Festus can't figure out what to charge Paul with. At this point Festus is like a quarterback who's got the ball, but can't locate the end zone. The referee now tosses the ball to the other side; Agrippa gives Paul permission to speak for himself.

As yet, there is no legal charge, so there can't be a legal defense. Instead, Paul's speech flows out of his intense religious fervor.

"King Agrippa! You know Jewish customs and Jewish controversies very well. I am indeed fortunate to be able to tell you my side of the story. Please be patient and hear me all the way through."

Agrippa does indeed have the possibility of becoming Paul's most sympathetic "court." All the others, except the Sanhedrin, were Roman, not Jewish. And the Sanhedrin was just too involved emotionally to listen at all. Agrippa has the Jewish background, and he also has enough savvy to know a political prisoner when he sees one.

Still, this affair is essentially none of Agrippa's business. Paul cannot, therefore, expect too much of him. About all Paul can ask of Agrippa is, "If you can't help this hillbilly, don't you help that bear!"

"I was brought up a super strict Pharisee," Paul begins. "But now, because I really believe in the hope that God gave to the twelve tribes of Israel, the descendants of those tribes are accusing me."



He speaks of that hope and his frustration spews over. "Why," he blurts out, "do you Jews find it so incredible that God can rouse the dead?"

He recalls, however, that he himself felt the same way — so strongly, in fact, that "in Jerusalem I got permission to throw believers into prison. I voted for their deaths. I did every thing I could to make them deny their faith. I was so furious I even pursued them to other cities."

Those "other cities" included Damascus. Up to this point it is possible that Paul has not told Agrippa anything he didn't already know. Now he has led the king to the central event of his life, the event that motivates everything Paul does and is and says: the conversion event on the road to Damascus.

— Acts 26: 1-11



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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

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The dazzling, emotional, heart-stopping road-to-Damascus story gets told once more. This time Paul stands before King Agrippa and tells him of that memory which burns through his life.

He tells Agrippa why he was going to Damascus — to persecute believers. He tells him that at midday he saw a light “much brighter than the sun.” He tells him it encompassed his whole party — all of whom bit the dust.

“I heard a voice speak to me in Hebrew,” Paul relates. “It said, ‘Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?’ It told me I was hurting myself by fighting the faith so hard — I was like an animal kicking out against its owner’s prod. I asked who was speaking to me. I was told it was the very Jesus whom I persecuted so vigorously.”

We can hear the urgency in Paul’s voice: “I was at that moment appointed by him to be his special servant. And I was told to tell others about it and about other encounters to occur.”

Further, Paul tells Agrippa, the Lord made a promise. Though the Lord would send Paul to the people of Israel and to the Gentiles, he would save him from those in either group who would seek to destroy. “You are to open their

eyes," the Lord has told him. "Turn them from darkness to light. Turn them from the power of Satan to the power of God. They will have their sins forgiven. Through their faith in me they will receive their share of the kingdom."

Paul's conversion makes a dramatic story, and Paul obviously enjoys telling it. This version differs some from those found in Acts 9 and Acts 22. In this retelling, the whole party, not just Paul, drops to the ground. Also here we learn that the Lord spoke to Paul in the Hebrew language. The little simile "kicking against the goad (or prod)" is also a new addition. Most obvious, though in this version, is the fact that Paul has left out the good intermediary, Ananias. Possibly this is to make Paul's commission as servant and witness seem more authoritative to Agrippa. It cuts out the middleman, so to speak.

Paul continues. "Your majesty, I obeyed that vision I had from heaven. First in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and in the countryside of Judea I urged people to repent of their sins." Scholars have a minor problem with the Judea part. There is no other record of Paul's preaching in Judea. Possibly it is simply a reference to the journey from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

"I pleaded with the people to turn to God," he continues, "and to show it by their actions. That's why the Jews grabbed me in the Temple and tried to kill me. I believe, however, that I have been helped by God right up to this very minute. That's why I stand here right now, testifying to king and commoner alike."

And now, his life-long theme: "I tell people the same thing the prophets and Moses said: that the Messiah would

suffer, and that he would be the first one to rise from death and to announce that salvation is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike."

Festus, whose Roman background just can't keep up with all this Jewish theology, blurts out, "Paul, you've gone stark, raving mad! All that learning is driving you crazy."

"I am not crazy, your Excellency!" Paul says calmly. "Every word I speak is truth." He turns to the Jewish Agrippa. "Sir! I know you understand such things. After all, none of this has been kept a secret. Let me ask you, do you believe the prophets? Surely you do." It's a great "have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife?" question. If Agrippa says no, then he throws out his whole Jewish faith. If he says yes, then he should surely see the logic of Paul's argument.

Agrippa tosses the question off with some degree of flippancy. "In this short time, you're going to make me a Christian?"

There is more than answer in Paul's response. There is prayer. "Whether a short time or long, sir, I pray to God that you — and everyone here — could be as I am —except for these chains!"

So Paul has told his story once more. He has done so as part of his defense: his conversion to Christianity is the fulfillment of his Jewishness. But he has also done so in the hope that somehow the king will be touched, quickened, warmed by the light.

There's not much room for repartee after that, and the king has heard all he needs to hear to counsel Festus. He stands up, followed by his retinue.

Later, he, Bernice and Festus talk over Paul's presen-

tation. They agree: "This man has done nothing to deserve the death penalty — or even to be put into prison."

Agrippa has a significant "furthermore" to say to Festus. "This man could be set free if he had not appealed to the emperor."

— Acts 26: 12-32

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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

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*Losing one glove  
is certainly painful,  
but nothing  
compared to the pain  
of losing one,  
throwing away the other  
and finding the first one again.<sup>1</sup>*

Guess who just found his other glove? Thinking he has no chance to survive otherwise, Paul has legally bound himself to a trial before Caesar. Now King Agrippa comes along and hands him the other glove. "This guy could have been released," he tells Festus, "if he hadn't appealed to the emperor."

On the other hand, things aren't all bad. Paul has always wanted to preach in Rome. Suddenly it is clear he will go there, albeit to stand before the emperor.

Luke's writing seems to leap to life whenever Paul

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1. Piet Hein, "A Consolation Grook," Grooks, p. 4, Copyright 1966, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York.

sets foot on board a ship. Very often, Luke flings the word “we” into the travel passages. It is as if he felt it were okay to be a part of the journeying, but not okay to be in the public eye while Paul is preaching. “When it was decided that we should sail for Italy,” he writes, “Paul, along with some other prisoners, was put under the charge of a guard named Julius.”

Luke also tells us that Aristarchus will accompany Paul to Rome. Remember him? He’s one of those who got dragged before the rioters of Ephesus when the mob couldn’t find Paul. Obviously, he is a brave and loyal friend to Paul.

Happily, guard Julius is no Caesar. At the first stop, Sidon, he allows Paul to visit friends overnight, and to be supplied with pajamas or whatever it may be Paul forgets to bring with him.

Setting sail again the next morning, the travelers get battered around a bit by a rough wind. However, they make it to the harbor at Myra without incident. There Julius locates a ship from Alexandria that is headed for Italy, and makes arrangements for them to board.

The weather gets worse. Sailing is slow and difficult. The ship is forced to keep close to the coast because of the wind. Finally, it struggles into a place called Fair Havens in Crete.

It is now past the Jewish celebration of Atonement. Too much time has been lost. October is a risky month in the Mediterranean. A shipboard conference is called, and Paul is included. He expresses his concern. “I think we’re headed for trouble if we continue on now. We could lose the cargo, the ship and even our lives.”

One word from Paul and the crew does as it pleases.



The captain and the owner of the ship convince Julius that Fair Havens is not a good harbor to winter in. He decides to sail on.

A gentle breeze comes up, exactly right for sailing to Phoenix, west of Fair Havens. Most of the crew believes the ship can spend the winter in Phoenix. Bad guess! Almost immediately after they weigh anchor, a hurricane, a "northeaster," comes slamming down on them. The ship is shot like a missile way off course. At one point, the ship passes close enough to the small island of Cauda to experience a comparative calm. The men use that time to pull the ship's passenger boat on board and secure it with ropes. As the storm whips on, they lower the sail for fear they might get pushed into the sandbanks off the coast of Libya. Each day some desperate new measure is taken. One day some of the ship's cargo of grain is thrown overboard, the next day some of its equipment is tossed.

The wind is so heavy and the rain so furious, that there are many days the voyagers cannot tell if it is day or night. Seasickness, depression and fear overtake them. They cannot even bring themselves to eat. "Finally," Luke writes simply, "we gave up all hope of surviving."

But something happens to Paul — something that moves him to stand before his shipmates and say, "I told you so!" Having reminded everybody that if they had listened to him in the first place, they would not now be in this mess, he then becomes very reassuring.

"Don't lose heart, I beg of you!" he shouts above the wind. "Not one of us will die! Last night the God I worship and serve sent an angel to me. The angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You will stand before the emperor. God

in his goodness will save you and everyone on board.' So take heart, my friends. Remember, we are all in the same boat! Everything is going to be all right! We will soon come to an island!"

As the fourteenth night of wild terror approaches, so does that promised island.

— Acts 27: 1-26

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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

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Two hundred and seventy-six seasick sailors, sloshing around on a saturated ship that is schlepping around somewhere at sea, somehow get shunted to shore and get stuck in a sandy shoal.

That, in s-sense, is the story of Acts 27:27-44. However, alliteration does not represent the essence of Luke's fine, vivid telling of the incident.

The story he tells is crisp with drama. A wild and punishing storm has for two full weeks beat upon the ship taking Paul to Rome. Those on board give up all hope of living through it, until, as we have seen, an angel comes to Paul and promises that all will survive.

Now it is around midnight of the fourteenth night. The experienced sailors on the ship sense that land is near. Dropping lines at various intervals, they confirm that the water is indeed becoming shallower.

For these sea-wise sailors, knowing they are approaching land in this storm and in this darkness does not enthrall them. What if the ship should slam onto a rocky coast and get dashed to pieces? They do the only two things they can think of to forestall such an occurrence: they lower

four anchors and pray for daylight.

Their fear, however, rises faster than does the dawn. Panicking, some of the sailors decide to lower the ship's one passenger boat and escape. Asked what they are doing, they hedge. "Uh, heh, heh, just going around to the other side of the ship to lower some more anchors."

The story doesn't hold water for Paul. He turns to Julius. "If those sailors leave this ship none of you will make it."

It is true. Their best chance for survival is for skilled seamen to handle the ship. Julius orders his soldiers to cut the ropes from the passenger boat. It drops, empty, into the ocean.

Undoubtedly, scared and angry sailors flare up at scared and angry soldiers, though Luke doesn't record it.

As the edge of dawn light finally comes, Paul stands before his weary shipmates. Never does he speak with more tenderness.

"You have hung on now for fourteen days, and in all that time you haven't eaten a thing. Come, now," he pleads, "I beg of you. Eat some food. You'll need all the strength you can get. Not a hair of your heads will be lost."

Paul then holds up some bread, gives thanks to God in front of them all, breaks the bread, and begins to eat. Certainly Luke's telling of this incident reminds us of the last supper. But Paul's motive seems to be simply to get these exhausted men to take some nourishment. It works. Every person on board begins to eat. They eat until they are full and satisfied. Spirits begin to rise.

They now have the energy to lighten the vessel by throwing the rest of the cargo of grain overboard, so they

shuck it into the ocean.

As full daylight comes, the sailors strain through the early morning mist to try to identify the island they can see is approaching. No one recognizes the island, but they do spot a bay with a beach area. They decide to try to run the ship aground there.

Shouted orders and quick activity jar the ship to sudden life. The anchors are cut and left in the water. The rudders are unfastened and made operable. The front sail is raised. The ship scuds forward and heads for shore.

To the voyagers it must seem too good to be true. They are right. It is too good to be true. The ship suddenly gets caught up in a cross current and whams right into a sandbar. The front of the ship is hopelessly stuck in the shoal. Meanwhile, the rear of the ship, Luke tells us sternly, gets battered and pounded by relentless breakers. The vessel begins wrenching apart.

This creates yet another crisis on board. As at the jail at Philippi, the soldiers on the ship could be executed if the prisoners escape. Obviously, the way to prevent that is to kill all of the prisoners. The soldiers prepare to do just that.

But Julius intervenes. This brave man is willing to risk an escape of the other prisoners to save Paul. In a moment surely pulsing with suspense, he orders the soldiers to withdraw, and they do. The ship could probably have made it back to Fair Havens on the sigh of relief the prisoners must have given.

That done, it's let's-get-the-heck-off-this-ship time. Julius barks orders for all those who can swim to jump overboard. Those who can't swim are to find themselves a plank or

some piece of the ship and hang on until they drift ashore.

Somehow, it works. Every last man reels on to the shore, wet, cold, exhausted — and safe, just as Paul had been promised.

— Acts 27: 27-44

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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

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The place: an island in the Mediterranean.

The time: early morning.

The scene: astounding.

Thoroughly soaked and bedraggled men struggle on to the beach, gasping, stumbling, anxiously calling out to each other. Beyond them, in the sea, more men bob in toward the shore. Farther out yet is half a ship. Two hundred seventy six voyagers, among them Paul and Luke, have just arrived in Malta.

It must be a bit of a surprise to the Maltese to find, upon awakening, that their beach is littered with exhausted sailors. They could not, however, have responded with more compassion and hospitality. So we may never know what makes a Maltese cross.

The rain begins again. Everyone is shivering cold. The islanders build a huge bonfire. Luke says warmly, "They made us all feel welcome."

It is typical of Paul that after all he has been through in the last few hours he has enough energy left to help gather wood for the fire. It is also typical that though he is not yet dry from nearly drowning, he is beset by still another near-fatal emergency. While he is putting a bundle

of sticks into the fire, a poisonous snake somehow coils on to his hand. Apparently, the heat of the fire has driven it out of the wood.

There are said to be no poisonous snakes in Malta today. But on the day in question, there was obviously at least one. Paul is surely not too thrilled about the snake's attachment to him, but he doesn't get rattled. He apparently stands motionless for a moment, during which time the natives of Malta murmur among themselves. "This man must be a murderer. He escaped the sea, but justice won't let him live."

Then, carefully, Paul shakes the snake off his hand and into the fire. The islanders just can't believe it. For a long time they just stare at Paul. It must have been embarrassing. Here they are, watching Paul, waiting for him to swell up or fall down dead, and here is Paul, trying to act polite, but not be too obliging.

Finally, the natives give up. They know now they were wrong. He is not a murderer. He is a god.

We do not know how Paul handled that god business. We do remember, however, how distressed he became earlier when the Lystrans also thought he was a god. ("What are you doing? We are just men like you!" Acts 14:15)

It is interesting to note that in Mark 16:17-18, Jesus says, "Believers will be given these signs of power: they will drive out demons in my name; they will speak in strange tongues; if they pick up snakes or drink any poison, they will not be harmed; they will place their hands on the sick, and they will get well." (Today's English Version, American Bible Society.) Luke, in his Book of Acts, has



now shown Paul to demonstrate every one of the categories of these signs.)

Apparently, even gods have to get in out of the rain, so the natives make arrangements for the voyagers to take shelter. Luke and Paul (and perhaps some or all of the others) are to be the temporary guests of the island chief, a property owner named Publius.

Publius is kind enough to take them in for three days, despite the fact that his father is desperately ill with fever and dysentery. Paul, of course, responds to the sick man's need with the love of his Lord. He lays his hands on Publius' father and heals him with prayer. (That probably does not do much to tarnish his reputation as a god.) Word gets around, naturally, and naturally all the sick people on the island come to Paul to be healed.

The ministry in Malta lasts for three months, until it is safe to sail again. Arrangements are made for a ship named "The Twin Gods" to take Paul on to Rome. The ship is from Alexandria, harbored for the winter here in Malta. It is named for Castor and Pollux, twin deities who are supposed to take special care of sailors. "Where were they when we needed them?" Paul may well have wondered.

When the time comes for Paul to board, his Maltese friends give him every provision he could need. As the ship pulls away, the beach is surely crowded with islanders waving their loving farewell.

Paul must feel a sense of relief to be on the way again, and a great sense of anticipation. Finally, he is on the last stretch of his trip to Rome.



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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

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"I must also see Rome!"

How Paul has yearned for this moment that is now but a breath away.

"I must also see Rome!"

We first learn of his longing when he was in Ephesus, just prior to that craziness with the silversmiths. (Acts 19:21.)

Rome! City of glamor and variety, political intrigue and military macho, romance, history, paganism and Christianity.

Three years earlier, Paul had written to the Christians in Rome, "Many times I have planned to visit you, but something has always prevented me from doing so." (Romans 1:13.)

Has Paul dreamed of arriving in Rome in an aura of glory? He comes in chains instead, to be tried before the Roman emperor for believing in the resurrection.

Does he, then, go slouching into Rome staring at his feet? Of course not. We're talking about ol' Paul. He knows he is innocent of doing wrong. And certainly he looks forward to being able to preach again — and in Rome!

So we find Paul eagerly boarding the ship at Malta that

will take him on to Italy. With him are faithful friend Luke and probably Aristarchus.

The ship makes several quick stops along the way. The travelers spend three days in Syracuse in Sicily, and one day in Rhegium. That's on the toe of the boot of Italy, in case you get a kick out of such analogies. And finally, Luke tells us, a wind from the south gusts them into the port of Puteoli.

The believers in Puteoli treat Paul as a dear and favorite brother, almost as if he had been here before.

"Stay with us!" they beg him.

Apparently with the consent of Paul's Roman guard Julius, arrangements are made to stay for a week's visit.

During that week, swift word is sent to Rome: "Paul is coming!" That great preacher and missionary, whom the believers in Rome know by reputation, and whom they treasure for his letter of three years earlier, is on his way to them!

Exhilaration wings through the Christian community in the city of the Emperor. The believers in Rome do not know exactly what day Paul will arrive, but they do know he will come on foot via the famous old Appian Way.

All along that ancient road to Rome they begin to gather. As far out as the place called Three Taverns they come, thirty-three miles from the city. And yet another ten miles farther — all the way to the Appii Forum some of the believers walk, to wait and watch for Paul.

What a festival of embracing and handshaking and delighted laughter there must be when he finally arrives. He comes in chains, but in chains for the Lord they love, and he will enter Rome in honor after all.

Paul is surely moved—even stunned—by this welcome from these folks he has never before met. We have seen him weep at moments of parting. Now, at this extraordinary moment of greeting, we can imagine tears again glistening in his eyes.

In a human sense, all that Paul has endured for the faith, all that it has cost him, and all that he has given so freely, is surely rewarded now, on this dusty road outside of Rome, in “full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.” (Luke 6:38.)

Paul’s spirits are lifted, writer Luke tells us simply. He is touched and warmed and encouraged, and he gives his thanks to God.

— Acts 28: 11-15



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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

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"Where be's the evidence that do accuse me?"

Paul, practicing his Cockney? No, Clarence in Shakespeare's Richard III.

Think of the time and trouble Paul would have been saved if he could have printed Clarence's words on cards and just passed them out at riots and the other fun events Paul so diligently attends. He certainly has had to ask the same question often enough: What evidence is there against me?

Now in Rome he asks it again. This time, however, he stands in his own living quarters and speaks to folks who are there by his own invitation. He has been in Rome only three days but already he has rented an apartment and invited the leaders of the Jewish community to meet with him. It is obvious he will let no grass grow under his feats.

He rents the apartment by permission of the Roman officials, though they provide him with a live-in guard. The officials keep him prisoner, but he pays his own rent. Maybe it seems the lease he could do.

After the touching welcome Paul has received from the Christians of this city, it must be with considerable curiosity

that the Jewish leaders come to hear him now.

Paul has his speech down pat for addressing Jews about their Messiah. He begins by calling these Jewish leaders "brothers." He never lets Jews forget that he, too, is a Jew.

"Brothers, I have not done anything to hurt the Jews or to downgrade our faith. Yet here I am, a prisoner from Jerusalem, turned over to the Romans. Roman courts have already heard my case. They would have dismissed it and released me, as they can find nothing I have done that deserves punishment. But Jerusalem Jews protested, so I had no choice but to appeal to Caesar."

Is there some stirring in the audience? Paul is quick to reassure. "Not, you understand, that I have anything against Israel. In fact, the very reason I wanted to see you and talk to you is because of Israel's hope."

Clearly, this is a reference to their hope of the Messiah, a hope Paul believes is already fulfilled in Jesus. He goes on to say, "It is because of that hope that I come to you in chains."

The Jewish leaders give him an astonishing reply. "So who's complaining?" they ask in effect. "Nobody here has had any bad word about you. No letters from Jerusalem have arrived and no one has come in person to accuse you of anything."

Paul must feel as if he has just hitched the proverbial cart to the proverbial horse's nose. There he stands making a defense, and he has not yet been accused. It surprises us a little too, to learn that Paul's Jerusalem accusers have not made an effort to stir up the Jews of Rome.

However, though the Roman Jews have heard nothing bad about Paul, they have also heard nothing good about



Christianity.

"We'd like to hear what you think about this sect," they tell Paul. It never occurs to them that they have been sweetly had. Why do they think Paul invited them to his apartment in the first place? In any case, they decide there is enough interest to call another meeting on another date, and to invite others to come too.

Whereupon, as truly proper ecclesiastical leaders, they undoubtedly whip out their little date books and spend forty-five minutes trying to find a time agreeable to all.

— Acts 28: 16-23



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## CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

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“An aloof cat always knows how long your arms are.” That’s bad Confucius, but genuine truth. If Katty is feeling too important to be petted, she’ll always sit exactly one centimeter from the tip of one’s reach, no matter what the long or short of it. It’s an immutable law of the universe.

It must seem to Paul that the Jews he so yearns to convert also know how long his arms are. So often his reach falls just short of touching these men and women of his own flesh and blood and heritage — just short of drawing them close to his Christ.

It is evening. Paul has been preaching since early morning. It is his second meeting with the Jews in Rome. He pours out his soul about the Kingdom of God. As always, he supports his belief in Jesus by quoting Jewish Scripture to his Jewish audience.

As guests in Paul’s home, these Romans may consider themselves a captive audience, but they are apparently not a captivated one. Some who listen do joyfully embrace Christ and the resurrection. But no amount of talking will convince the others.

Paul is undoubtedly disappointed at not converting all who hear him. Given the circumstances, he is also

undoubtedly tired. His famous temper flashes.

"The Holy Spirit spoke well through Isaiah to your ancestors!" he snaps. "Listen to what God said: 'You will listen and listen, but not understand; you will look and look, but not see. The people's hearts have grown dull. They've plugged their ears and closed their eyes. They don't want to see and understand. If they would open up their eyes and ears and hearts, they might understand, and turn to me, and I would heal them.'" (Acts 28:26,27; Is. 6:9,10)

Jesus used this very same passage when his disciples asked him to explain the parables (Mark 4:12 and Luke 8:10.) It is, however, the first time we know of that Paul uses it. He applies it sternly: "You are to know then, that God's message of salvation has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen!"

As usual, that's the party-stopper. Everyone gets up and goes on home, quarreling all the way about the message they have spent all day listening to.

Something seems a little strange here. Why does writer Luke feel the necessity to record this incident? Its point has been made many times already: Paul takes his message first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. Told here, it comes as a let-down after the moving and lovely climax to Luke's story — Paul's entrance into Rome.

Perhaps this tells us how terribly important it is to Luke to present Paul not as a detractor of the Jewish faith, but as one who sees Jesus as the fulfillment of that faith. It is as if Luke just had to say, one last time, that Paul always gave the Jews the first chance to know Jesus, before presenting his message to Gentiles.

Having made that point again, Luke now brings his

Book of Acts to a close: "For two years Paul lived in Rome, in a place he rented for himself, and he welcomed all who came to see him. He preached about God's Kingdom and he shared his knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. He spoke boldly, having complete freedom to do so."

And — that's all, folks!

Luke, how can you do this to us? How can you put down your quill without telling us how Paul's trial came out? Why do you not record another single story of Paul's life during those two years? Why do you leave your writing without an ending?

Perhaps because Luke's masterpiece goes unfinished we can see more clearly what it really is. The Book of Acts is not, after all, a journal of the lives of Paul and Peter and the others. It is instead the beautiful and almost clinical record of a birth — the birth of a new life which came to be called Christianity, and which had as its midwife the man called Paul.

Centuries earlier, an Egyptian poet wrote this hymn to a sun god:

"When the chick cries out in its shell,  
You give him breath to sustain him,  
You empower him to break his way from the egg  
And come forth and chirp at its time."<sup>1</sup>

And what of our time? Even over the roar of our powerful, and the gasp of our hurting, and the pleas of our good, we hear still that tender, calling peep of the body of Christ on earth, the church empowered to come forth and chirp at its time.

— Acts 28: 23-31

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1. Wells, Evelyn, *Nefertiti*, p. 172, Doubleday Co., Inc. Garden City, N.Y.



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## CHAPTER 79

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### THEME: THE EARLY CHURCH GROWS

Eeyore, that delightfully morose stuffed donkey in Winnie-the-Pooh, has sat too long with his tail in the water.

“Lost all feeling,” he grouses. “Numbed it.”

Christopher Robin offers to dry his tail for him.

“Thank you, Christopher Robin. You’re the only one who seems to understand about tails...”

Then, in reference to some other, less imaginative friends, he says, “A tail isn’t a tail to them, it’s just a Little Bit Extra at the back.”<sup>1</sup>

Just a Little Bit Extra at the back is exactly the way we hope the reader will think of these last three chapters. They are theme chapters. As with any work of art, Luke’s Book of Acts is best understood by its themes. These chapters will explore three threads running through Acts: (1) the growth of the early church, (2) the Holy Spirit and (3) the resurrection.

Each theme will be explored only as it appears in

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1. A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*, p. 125, E.P. Dutton Co., New York.

Acts. (For instance, the Holy Spirit chapter will not touch on the image of the Spirit as Comforter, as that concept is not found in Acts, but in the Gospel of John.)

Perhaps the most visible theme in Acts is the spread of the church. Luke records it as swift and spectacular.

Paul, fervent soul, travels by land, sea and dare to transmit the resurrection news. So does Peter. So does Barnabas. And Silas. And Philip. And Luke. And uncounted others. Hardly a dud in the batch. In one generation, Jews come to believe, Gentiles come to believe, people in Judea and Samaria and even southern Europe turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. The disciples proclaim the resurrection in obedience to the final words of the risen Jesus: "...you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

It is Peter who first ignites the firecracker that is church expansion. At Pentecost, still swathed in the excitement generated by the Holy Spirit, he addresses the crowd:

"God has made Jesus Lord and Messiah!... Turn away from your sins...God's promise was made to you and your children and to all who are far away..."

He is exceedingly convincing. A monumental three thousand persons believe and are baptized that day. Church expansion is off to an astonishing start.

It may be Peter's finest moment, but it's not by any means his last. He travels "everywhere," Luke tells us. In Joppa he has a vision which he interprets to mean that he should tell non-Jews as well as Jews about the resurrection. Obediently, he goes to Cornelius' home in Caesarea and preaches to, and converts, and baptizes Gentiles.



Meanwhile, over in Antioch, the Holy Spirit calls Barnabas and Saul to action. "Set them apart for my special work," the Spirit tells the church leaders. So there is fasting, and praying and the laying on of hands, and Barnabas and Saul are literally shipped off. It is the first of three journeys Paul will take to tell the world of his Lord.

But convincing 3000 persons with one speech, and converting non-Jews who haven't even been expecting a Messiah, and boarding a ship with no safe return guaranteed — all that's the easy part.

And the hard part?

We are reminded of the story of a pair of Siamese twins, young women. One of them, upon meeting again a young man she had not seen for a long time, hesitated a moment, and then said, "You may not remember me, but..."

We who live two thousand years beyond the early church may not always remember, but the expansion of the church has a joined and inseparable twin: the persecution of the believers. Wherever the believers are forced to take refuge, there they share their faith.

On the day of Stephen's dramatic death, a vicious, house-to-house search for believers gets underway. Establishment Jews, anxious to stamp out this resurrection sect, drag men and women alike out of their homes and shove them into prison.

It is like an explosion. And like an explosion, it scatters the believers away from the center of activity. Many are forced to leave home and friends and belongings behind. But writer Luke hardly touches on the tragedy of this exile. Instead he sees opportunity: "The believers who were scattered went everywhere, preaching the message." In

a later passage, we learn that some believers went to Phoenicia, others to Cyprus, and others to Antioch of Syria.

Persecution from Establishment Jews was not the only persecution the believers had to deal with. A few years later the Romans, under Herod, executed James, the brother of John. When Herod saw this pleased certain Jews, he slammed Peter into prison. A little frosting on the cake.

Peter escaped by the literal grace of God, but it is clear he had to go into hiding. Writer Luke doesn't say much about the scattering effect of the Roman persecution. He just quietly and firmly asserts, "The Word of God continued to spread and grow."

Even Paul's journeys are shaped by persecution. In Lystra and Derbe, and in Thessalonica and many other towns, such persecution comes from non-believing Jews; in Philippi it comes from Roman opportunists; and in Ephesus it is the silversmiths.

Paul and his companions are beaten, jailed and/or thrown out of town after town. But they always have the courage to show up in the next town. And that next town is always given the opportunity to learn of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Where does it come from, this courage, shown by so many of the early believers, to continue preaching in spite of persecution?

The "mini-Pentecost" of Acts 4 gives us a pretty good idea. Early on, even before Stephen's death and the ensuing persecution, Peter and John are arrested. Their crime: healing a lame man in the name of the risen Jesus.

When they are finally released from jail they return to their anxious friends. Together the believers join in

prayer. Surprise! It is not, as we might expect, "Dear God, please notice our lives are threatened, and protect us, and keep us out of harm's way." Instead, the believers pray, "Lord, take notice of the threats and allow us, your servants, to speak your message with all boldness."

It is a marvelously poignant prayer. It touches us servants of today. It makes us wonder if we have sat too long with our tails in the water. Maybe we have numbed our sense of urgency in pools of timidity or busyness.

When the believers finish praying, the room shakes, they are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they indeed speak God's message with all boldness.

Clearly the victory over persecution is won at the onset. The expansion of the early church will not be easy. But it will proceed. And it will proceed in a triumphant sort of way.



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## CHAPTER EIGHTY

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### THEME: HOLY SPIRIT

God and the believers are sitting around in heaven, playing word association.

It's God's turn.

"Okay," God says. "What do you think of when I say 'Holy Spirit?'"

"That's easy!" Peter blurts. "Gift!"

"Good, that's good."

"I'd say Watchman!" declares Paul.

"Hmm. That's interesting. Be prepared to explain that later."

"How about Authority?" Barnabas offers.

"Ah. Authority! Anyone else?"

"Power!" says Luke. Everyone laughs.

"What is it that made you laugh?" God asks.

"It's just amusing that we didn't all think of it," Barnabas explains. "Power is such an obvious word for Holy Spirit."

"All right, let's go with power. Tell me why it seems so obvious."

"I'll bet I'm your best example," Peter quickly responds.

"Before Pentecost I was so afraid —"

"Uh, cowardly is the word," laughs John Mark.

"Okay, cowardly. The night they arrested Jesus, I couldn't even admit knowing him. But at Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit vibrating all around us, I suddenly felt ready to burst with power, and with courage that I never had before."

"And not just Peter," adds John. "We were all filled with that same power. It was just as Jesus told us it would be."

"Hey, you guys forget — I wasn't around in the beginning," Timothy complains. "When did Jesus say that?"

Just before he was taken into heaven," says Peter. "I'll never forget it. He said, 'You will be given power to be my witnesses to all the world.'"

"At that point we didn't know just how much we were going to need that power," John observes, "what with all that persecution, first from the Jews —"

"I don't want to talk about that," Paul blushes.

"— and then from the Romans."

"Considering those terrible times," says Barnabas, "I can't believe how fast the church grew."

"Surely that was the power of the Holy Spirit, too," Luke agrees. "But for me the most thrilling use of the power of the Spirit was that marvelous ability to heal that came to some disciples. That was wonderfully exciting."

"Anything else?" God encourages.

"Yes!" Peter declares. "Talk about power! You surged the Holy Spirit onto us at Pentecost with such force that we could hear the Spirit as a roaring wind and see the Spirit as tongues of flame!"

"And how did you feel about that?" God asks.

"Well," says John, "we were all so exhilarated we began to talk funny."

Peter adds, "I remember thinking, 'Wow! This is what Joel meant when he wrote, "God said, I will pour out my spirit upon all.."'"

"Think it, my foot!" laughs John. "You hopped up and shouted it to the crowd."

"Well, I thought we ought to make clear that this gift of the Holy Spirit was right out of our heritage."

"Ah, gift again!" God says. "Let's take a minute to explore that. It's your association, Peter. Why do you see the Holy Spirit as gift?"

"Because the last thing Jesus said before ascending into heaven was, 'Wait for the gift my father promised.'"

"What a great exit line!" laughs Timothy.

"Another thing," Peter continues, "we didn't have to ask for the Holy Spirit. You just poured Holy Spirit out on us, upon Jews and non-Jews alike."

"Yeah," pipes up John Mark. "When you reign, you pour."

John chooses to ignore John Mark. "Peter has always thought of the Holy Spirit as gift," he muses. "In fact, even at Pentecost he stood up and said, 'Turn away from your sins, and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit.'"

"True. That's true," Peter says demurely. "And I also remember pointing out to the Jerusalem Council that God showed approval of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit."

Luke speaks up. "I believe Peter was himself actively given the Holy Spirit, was filled with Holy Spirit — and

so were Stephen and Barnabas."

"And Saul," says Agabus.

"To say nothing of Jesus!" Luke adds.

"Ask me how I feel about that one, God," Peter prompts.

"How do you feel about that one, Peter?" God obliges.

"To be honest, a little confused."

"He's not kidding, God," John says. "First he told the Pentecost crowd that Jesus received the Holy Spirit after his resurrection and ascension. Then later he seemed to indicate that the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus during his earthly ministry."

"Yes," says Luke, "and I myself had still another idea. I wrote in my letter to Theophilus that the Holy Spirit was with Jesus just before he was taken up."

"Oh, well," says God "A little honest inconsistency will keep the theologians down there from becoming too pat."

Polite chuckles all around. Barnabas looks thoughtful. "Well, Peter may contradict himself at times, but he does have some appealing insights. He believes that what happened at Pentecost was Jesus sharing his own recently received gift of the Spirit with his friends. 'Jesus received the Holy Spirit from God,' he told the crowd, 'and what you see and hear is his gift that he has poured out on us.' I rather like that thought."

"Well, thank you!" beams Peter.

"Uh, God," John Mark ventures, "there's one thing I don't understand about the Holy Spirit."

"Just one?"

"Well — uh, heh, heh — at least one. The thing is, I'm not clear about the different baptisms. There's the



baptism of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of Jesus, and John's baptism."

"All right. Back to word association, everybody. What do you think of when I say 'John's baptism?'"

"Repentance!"

"Forgiveness of sins!"

"Aha! And what do you mean when you think of being baptized in the name of Jesus?"

"Hold it!" John Mark interrupts. "Oh, uh, I mean, excuse me, God, but I never heard of Jesus doing any baptizing."

"Did I say that?" smiles God.

"No, he didn't," Barnabas says to John Mark. "He's talking about baptism in the name of Jesus. Remember, Jesus did tell us to make disciples and to baptize them. The Samaritans, for instance were baptized in his name."

"And," Peter adds, "even though Cornelius and company received the Holy Spirit first, they were then baptized in the name of Christ."

"So," God tries again, "what do you think of when you think of the baptism of Jesus?"

"Discipleship!"

"Obedience!"

"All right. If John's baptism is a turning away from sin, and the baptism of Jesus is an embracing of discipleship and obedience, then the baptism of the Holy Spirit is — "

"The gift of power!" they say together.

"Right!" God affirms. "It is gift —"

"As I said!" boasts Peter.

"And it is power —"

"As I said," Luke reminds him.

"You are both right, of course. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is to be seen as Gift and as Power. But Barnabas! I believe your word for Holy Spirit was Authority."

"Right," says Barnabas. "I —"

"I'll buy that," Philip interrupts. "There I was, walking along the road to Gaza, and along comes this carriage. Suddenly the Spirit told me to go up to it. There was no question in my mind. Holy Spirit was my authority to approach that carriage and to convert the Ethiopian eunuch."

Peter has a thought. "How about the time I had that vision on the rooftop? There was certainly authority in the voice that told me to eat unclean animals — and that also told me not to hesitate to go with the strangers knocking on my door."

"Barnabas, what were you about to say?" asks God.

"Well, I remember the time the Holy Spirit told the congregation at Antioch to set Saul and me apart to do God's work."

"And that reminds me of the time the Holy Spirit prevented us from going into Asia," Luke says.

"And," says Paul, "there's the time —"

God holds up a hand. "Never mind. Got the point. You all seem to understand Holy Spirit as Authority. Let's go on to Paul's word. Paul, why Holy Spirit as watchman?"

"There may be something of the watchman in the way the Holy Spirit prevented us from going into Asia and Bithynia," Paul replies. "That is, some sense of guarding us. But I really refer to the three warnings the Holy Spirit gave me about what to expect upon returning to Jerusa-

lem."

Timothy speaks up. "Oh, yes. I remember the time the Holy Spirit warned you, prepared you, that imprisonment awaited if you should return to Jerusalem."

"Right. I shared that with the elders of Ephesus. And remember how the believers of Tyre tried to convince me not to go to Jerusalem? That was also the spirit as Watchman."

"And also my warning, the business with the belt —" Agabus says.

"Let's go back a bit, Paul," says God. "How would you characterize the Holy Spirit in your conversion experience on the road to Damascus? Gift? Power? Authority? Watchman?"

"All of those. The occurrence was pure gift. The Holy spirit was poured out onto me, a thoroughly undeserving persecutor. And there was so much power in the experience, energy enough to create light. Power enough to completely reverse my life. As to authority, literally, I would never again call my soul my own, or even want to.

"And was the watchman also in your conversion?"

Ananias speaks out for the first time. "I know the answer to that one, God. The risen Lord told me of Paul, 'I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my sake!'"

"How do you feel about that, Paul?" God asks.

I feel the Holy Spirit was, even in my conversion, guarding me, watching me, alerting me."

"Well, group!" God smiles. "Those are good words for the Holy Spirit: Gift, Power, Authority, Watchman. But suppose you were back on earth today. Someone says to you, 'But who is the Holy spirit?' How would you answer?"

Luke responds, "Well, I notice we sometimes use the term Holy Spirit interchangeably with God and with Jesus. For instance, Peter said to that other Ananias, "You lied to the Holy Spirit — you have lied to God." And I myself wrote in my letter to Theophilus that the Holy Spirit would not let Paul and Timothy preach in Asia, but in the next breath I said that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go into Bithynia."

Barnabas laughs, "You know, someone down there is going to catch on that all this sounds very like an early suggestion of the Trinity."

"Maybe that will help folks understand who the Holy Spirit is," says Paul.

"I think the Joel passage I quoted at Pentecost is very clear about who the Holy Spirit is," Peter states. "God said, 'I will pour out my Spirit...'"

"So the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the essence of God, the viability of God — " says Paul.

"— in a sense, a definition of who the person of God is," adds John.

Barnabas looks thoughtful again. "What a monumentally loving act it is then, for God's spirit to pour out upon God's believers."

"Ah!" says God. "How do you feel about that?"

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## CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

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### THEME: THE RESURRECTION

Resurrection! There is a sort of hovering mystery to the word. It makes a stunning presentation: a common man who bursts out of his own death, hurls it aside, discards it as the butterfly disdains the cocoon.

It is an immense and incomprehensible act. And it is the central fact of the Christian faith. All else in the faith orbits around the star called Resurrection.

The resurrection is also the most compelling theme in the Book of Acts. Writer Luke is swift to establish Jesus' return to life as irrefutable fact. In the very first paragraph of Acts he declares, "For forty days after Jesus died, he showed himself to his friends many times. He did so in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive."

Ways that proved beyond doubt! Thus Luke assures his friend Theophilus, for whom Acts is written, that the faith has this great, foundational, factual, proven premise: Jesus of Nazareth, having fully died, came back alive.

It's absurd, really. That is, it is remarkably incongruous with what we have otherwise known to be true about death. But for Luke, the resurrection is definitively real. And

having said so, he seems to think that's all that's necessary. He sees no need to present a scholarly theological outline of its meaning. So Luke leaves Theophilus to glean from the story what the resurrection is all about.

We stand now beside Theophilus and glean along with him. Lo, the resurrection material does suffer itself to be outlined, though not in the order written. (Luke wove us a fabric. He did not build us a staircase.)

Clearly, the first and most apparent pattern in the resurrection fabric is this: for the early church, the resurrection is absolute proof that Jesus is the promised Savior.

Peter ardently sets this forth at Pentecost. First he lays a scriptural base by reminding his Jewish audience that their ancient King David foresaw the resurrection of Christ.

Then he spells out for his listeners: "God has raised Jesus from the dead. We are all witnesses to this fact."

And then, "Everyone is to know that this Jesus whom you nailed to the cross, God has made Lord and Messiah."

It is a surprisingly clean, sharp, logical progression: 1) scripture says the Messiah will be raised from the dead 2) Jesus was raised from the dead 3) Jesus is the Messiah.

We find Paul, passionate preacher that he is, chanting the same litany: "What God promised our ancestors he would do (send a Messiah) he has now done for us, by raising Jesus to life."

So for the early church, for Luke and Peter and Paul, the resurrection is the symbol and proof that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's long expected Messiah.

Secondly, the resurrection gives touching new meaning to that word "Messiah" (or "Savior.")

Peter stands before the council and the high priest.

Boldly he declares, "God raised Jesus to give the people of Israel the opportunity to have their sins forgiven."

(Well, that's a switch. Where's the military messiah everyone's been expecting?)

And Paul counsels the people of Antioch: "My brothers, know for sure that it is through Jesus that the message about forgiveness of sins is preached. You are to know that everyone who believes in him is set free from all the sins from which the Law of Moses could not set you free."

(Doesn't sound much like a political leader, either.)

And at that tender moment in the jail at Philippi: "What must I do to be saved?" cries the jailer.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus," reply Paul and Silas, "and you will be saved..."

So, there is to be no war hero, no political boss, no strong arm to save Israel from its enemies. Instead, there is this man who comes back from death to save us from ourselves.

Third, the resurrection offers an authoritative, energetic power for healing.

Whatever we may or may not know of spiritual healing today, for the early church it was simple fact.

The lame man had always been lame. "You should all know," Peter says clearly, "that this man stands here before you, completely well by the power of the name of Jesus of Nazareth — whom you crucified and whom God raised from death."

In the same breath, the theme of forgiveness bursts through again, intertwining with the theme of healing: "Salvation is to be found through him alone..." It is almost as if physical healing is to be seen as a symbol of the

forgiveness wrought in the resurrection.

Fourth, incredible as it seems, the resurrection calls us all. It calls Jew and Gentile alike, to believe and to be saved. Even beyond belief (beyond belief as in faith and beyond belief as in credulousness) we are all called, good and bad, to the resurrection. Find that hard to believe? Listen to Paul in front of Governor Felix: "I hope, as did Moses and the prophets, that all persons, both good and bad, will be raised from death."

Resurrection, then, is the magnanimous, open-armed "come unto me" gesture of God, and no one is outside the circle of that embrace.

And finally, Luke characterizes the resurrection as good news.

Peter and John preached the good news in many villages in Samaria.

Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra and Derbe, where they preached the good news.

Paul speaks of the "work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do, which is to declare the Good News of the grace of God."

Good news for sure. We have seen that. The resurrection says, "Jesus is Savior." It says, "You are forgiven." It says, "Away, disease." It says, "Come as you are, whoever you are!"

But the resurrection is also good news. It is an astounding inbreak into the history of our world. So breath-taking is it that the mark of the believer should be a look of utter surprise. God has said, "Boo! I'm here!"

If we are not surprised and reassured and filled with joy, we are somehow missing the whole point of a God



who cares so much that resurrection results.

There is a piercing quality to that. It is as the teacher to whom a child offers a crayon painting. The teacher says, "But the lines are scribbly, and cows don't look like that. And shouldn't the barn be bigger?"

And the child asks, "But didn't you see my rainbow? Didn't you see its color?"

Perhaps in those restless moments when we feel too deeply the pain of disappointment, or fear too much the presence of evil in our world, or linger too long over the death of a loved one — perhaps then God asks of us,

"But didn't you see my resurrection? Didn't you see its love?"



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## CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

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### ONE OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

- 1:1-11    **Prologue:** Promise of Power
- 1:12-26    **Preliminaries:** Prayer, selection of  
              successor to Judas
- 2:1-47    **Marvelously Joyful Days**
  - 2:1-42    Pentecost!
  - 2:43-47    Deep fellowship
- 3:1-4:22    **The Beginnings of Trouble**
  - 3:1-10    Peter heals a lame man
  - 3:11-26    Peter defends his action
  - 4:1-22    Arrest and hearing before  
              the council
- 4:23-5:16    **The Young Church Matures**
  - 4:23-31    The believers pray for,  
              receive courage
  - 4:32-5:11    Spontaneous communal  
              living
  - 5:12-5:16    Miracles are performed



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- 9:36-43 Peter brings Dorcas back to life in Joppa
- 10:1-23 Peter told in vision to preach to Gentiles
- 10:24-48 Gentiles first receive Holy Spirit
- 11:1-18 Peter explains his Gentile ministry to the church at Jerusalem
- 11:19-26 The church at Antioch strengthened by Barnabas and Saul
- 11:27-30 Antioch church collects funds for famine relief
- 12:1-19 **Persecution from the Roman Government**
- 12:1-5 Herod kills James, jails Peter
- 12:6-19 Peter released from jail by angel
- 12:20-25 **An Historical Aside**
- 13:1-14:28 **Paul's First Missionary Journey**
- 13:1-3 Barnabas and Saul set apart
- 13:4-12 Governor of Cyprus converted
- 13:13 John Mark deserts missionary party
- 13:14-48 Paul preaches in Antioch of Pisidia
- 13:49-52 Persecution is stirred up

- 14:1-7 Paul in Iconium
- 14:8-20 Paul in Lystra
- 14:21-28 The return to Antioch
- 15:1-39 **Between Journeys**
  - 15:1-21 Jerusalem conference on Gentiles
  - 15:22-35 Letter to Gentiles
  - 15:36-39 Paul and Barnabas quarrel, part company
- 15:40-18:22 **Paul's Second Missionary Journey**
  - 15:40-41 Paul chooses Silas
  - 16:1-5 Paul picks up Timothy in Lystra
  - 16:6-10 Troas: Paul receives call to Macedonia
  - 16:11-40 Paul in Philippi
  - 16:11-15 Lydia converted
  - 16:16-40 Jailer converted
  - 17:1-9 Riot in Thessalonica
  - 17:10-15 Berea: more trouble
  - 17:16-34 Athens: Paul speaks in Areopagus
  - 18:1-17 Eighteen months in Corinth
  - 18:18-22 The return trip
- 18:23-21:14 **Paul's Third Missionary Journey**
  - 18:23 In Galatia and Phrygia
  - 18:24-20:1 Paul in Ephesus
  - 18:24-28 Apollos
  - 19:1-22 Paul's ministry in Ephesus

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- 19:23-41 Riot!
  - 20:1 Paul leaves Ephesus
  - 20:2-6 Paul in Macedonia and Greece
  - 20:7-12 Eutychus falls out of window in Troas
  - 20:13-16 From Troas to Miletus
  - 20:17-36 Paul's farewell speech
  - 21:1-14 The return trip
  - 21:15-23:33 **Paul in Jerusalem**
    - 21:15-26 Paul participates in purification ceremony
    - 21:27-36 Riot in Temple!
    - 21:37-22:21 Paul defends himself before the mob
    - 22:22-29 Paul arrested
    - 22:30-23:10 Paul before Jewish council
    - 23:11 Courage from the Lord
    - 23:12-22 The plot to kill Paul
    - 23:23-35 Paul is rushed to Caesarea
  - 24:1-26:32 **Paul in Caesarea**
    - 24:1-9 Formal accusation before Governor Felix
    - 24:10-22 Paul's defense before Governor Felix
    - 24:23-27 Two years in prison
    - 25:1-12 Before Governor Festus
    - 25:13-26:32 Paul's defense before King Agrippa

**27:1-28:14    On the Way to Rome**

27:1-12    A rough start

27:13-38    A two week storm

27:39-44    Shipwreck on Malta

28:1-10    The stay in Malta

28:11-14    From Malta to Rome

**28:15-31    Paul in Rome**





